

Aaron West

John Knittel


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AARON WEST

JOHN KNITTEL

*Why is light given to a man whose
way is hid, and whom God hath
hedged in?*

BOOK OF JOB.

1.
AARON WEST ^{PK 6021}
^{N453A}

BY
JOHN KNITTEL

WITH PREFACE BY
ROBERT HICHENS



NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PREFACE

By ROBERT HICHENS

Knowing that I read the book while it was in manuscript, the publishers of *Aaron West* have asked me to write a few words by way of preface to it now that it is going into the world to take its chance among the readers of novels. I am willing to do so, for I confess to having a soft corner in my heart for "little smiling Aaron," although the lovers of the "nice" in literature may be shocked at his very unconventional life, both in London and in those exotic regions for which at an early age he set sail comfortably ensconced in a plush arm-chair. Now and then a character in fiction takes hold of you, you scarcely know why. You may like or dislike him or her. You may approve or disapprove of his or her doings. But you really know that individual. A new, and apparently living being has come into your life.

Such a character for me is Aaron West. *Aaron West* is a first book, and though it was written in English, its author, John Knittel, is a Swiss. He was born in India, and spent the early years of his life there. Then he went with his parents to Switzerland, where he was educated. When he was eighteen years old he left Switzerland and established himself in England; and he has made his home in England ever since, though from time to time he has travelled abroad.

A famous writer has said that the object of literature nowadays is "to amuse without doing harm," and has added cynically that "if you do that well you will be famous and rich." It is doubtless very admirable to amuse, and I fancy that few writers take up their pens and sit down at their desks with the deliberate intention of doing harm. But an author whose sole aim is to entertain the reader and to keep him carefully wrapped up in scented cotton wool, less peradventure he may be in danger from any of the spear-pointed truths of

life, is not likely to do anything very big. Sincerity is the hallmark of all fine work, and one of the surest ways of losing sincerity is to aim at being famous and rich.

When I take up a book by a new author the first thing I look for is sincerity. If I find it, I read on, certain that I am going to be interested, whatever the faults, whatever the crudities due to inexperience and lack of the long habit of writing. For in nearly all first books which are sincere there is an engaging frankness, there is a bloom, there is a vitality which carries you over the difficult places and puts back the clock for the sympathetic reader.

Aaron West seems to me to be an eminently sincere book. It cannot be called a happy book, but its author must surely have enjoyed writing it, and have written it rather for his own pleasure than with a view to material gain, for it is marked in many places by an exuberance which tells a tale of enjoyment. As books go nowadays I suppose it might be called long; but it is full of variety; it carries the reader from one part of the globe to another; and the author's rapidly travelling mind makes us range over vast distances with him, and feel with Aaron the lure of the seas and the magic of unspoiled nature.

I will not enter into this book here like a surgeon with a dissecting knife. I will not attempt to analyze it minutely. That I leave to the critical reader. But I will just touch upon a few points in connection with the chief character which seem to me worth mentioning, and which helped to rouse my keen interest in Aaron.

Certainly Aaron was not a naturally moral human being. Probably few men are naturally moral. But Aaron was undoubtedly naturally wild, reckless and entirely unconventional. He begins life with an eager zest for adventure which his circumstances enable him to gratify. During many years he seems to have been an egoist, bent on enjoyment in his own peculiar way, not without rough good feeling, certainly not without strong emotions, but decidedly given over to the indulgence of self, and unrestrained by any strict sense of conduct or any appreciation of religion. He is shown to us as primitive man impatient of civilization.

The coming of woman intimately into his existence does nothing to improve him. How should it when the author has it in mind to draw for us the picture of a Victoria? There are moments when Aaron seems almost past praying for with his polished finger nails and his carefully trimmed beard. But he never loses his ardent love of the water, and somehow one feels as if blue water must be the saving of him. It is a relief to others as well as to himself when he is once more on the deck of a ship.

And far away across the sea the real deep-down Aaron, a strange being if ever there was one, awakens from sleep. In an apparently non-moral and non-religious man complete purity, and absolutely disinterested goodness, existing and working in fantastically beautiful surroundings, rouse not merely a sense of religion and a desire for moral betterment, but an intense and even fierce religious zeal.

Aaron becomes a crusader. He not only toils with self-abnegation for others, but he strives to improve his own nature. He even gives up his life to the cause of religion and empties his pockets for it. One longs to see him succeed in his efforts, but he carries within him the seeds of failure. He is far too passionate, far too hotly impetuous to conquer the sinfulness in men or even his own sinfulness. He has a temperament which cannot be tamed. It is this temperament which makes him so interesting, so living, but it is this temperament which dooms him to unhappiness. From the beginning of the book one feels that Aaron is singled out to live an unhappy life. He is a passionate solitary, a vehement failure, a self-elected preacher who in earlier times might perhaps have been a magnificent pirate. But always he is emphatically and fully a man. A more thoroughly and almost overwhelmingly male character I have not met with in fiction, and his actions display his character with an almost fatal precision.

Because he is so tremendously masculine, and because he has such fierce intensity, it is not difficult to understand that he might attract women, although his author has certainly been at no pains to make him physically beautiful. If Aaron conquers at any time, it is because of his strength. Bodily he is strong, but he has also a peculiar inner strength which I at

least feel even in his worst moments of failure. His extraordinary attitude to his Creator shows strength, his treatment of Victoria at a horribly critical moment in London, his strange attempt to overcome the wickedness of the Metropolis, even his final renunciation—which I will not describe here; and even when he falls from his own conception of what a man who has seen the Light ought to be, he falls with strength, like a rock hurled down from a height.

Perhaps that is why one sympathizes with him. With all his grotesqueness, all his violence, all his wickedness—if you please to call it so—the man is so strong and so abominably human that it is difficult entirely to condemn him. In some mysterious way all through the book the author manages to retain my sympathy for Aaron; and often rouses my deep pity for him. To win what he won and lose what he lost—that is surely punishment enough for any man. And all the sacrifice of bodily comfort and of money proves the earnestness of the man. Aaron is emphatically not a “nice” character. But sum it all up, his good and his evil, strike a balance, and can one hate Aaron? I think not. For one feels that he has in him obscure, but powerful, instincts striving towards the light, that he has tenderness under all his brutalities, that, given the chance, he might have been a very fine fellow. There is tragic humour in many of his actions. His want of true knowledge of life, in spite of his manifold experiences, is almost sublime in its simplicity. And there is something heroic not only in his attempt to reform himself and the world, but also in his stoic acceptance of failure, of poverty, of loneliness.

Grouped around him are some strongly contrasted characters: Victoria of the jewels, the dressing-cases, the morocco armchairs; King, the intellectual-looking athlete; Betty, the converted maid; the six little boys who helped Aaron in his London crusade; “the lethargic American” who found Betty as straight as a ruler; Somna, the golden virgin; Mother Sabeth; Tenania, the horrible adherent of Oro; Marva-Rao, the tattooed giant, with the magnificent limbs and the atrophied soul; little David Fananao; the crew of the *Amadea*, and David Sunbeam of Plymouth.

But Aaron dominates the whole book, and when I close it

I feel that he is still off the Cornish coast in his weather-beaten yawl, the *Shark*, waiting—for what? Perhaps for a new revelation.

Ibsen says in one of his plays that if a thing is desired strongly enough by some one with a powerful will, at last it has to happen. So, surely, for such a character as Aaron West there must be some hope. He was a man of great longings and great longings are not, I think, destined to be cast away to rot on the dust heap with all the refuse of the soul. When we demand a “sign,” as Aaron demanded it, the sign may not be given to us. But it is often given to us when we least expect it.

Aaron West may have done with Life; but has Life done with Aaron West?

I doubt it.

And so I leave him.

R. H.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	15
THE FIRST JOURNEY	59
THE SECOND JOURNEY	113
THE THIRD JOURNEY	207
THE FOURTH JOURNEY	275
THE LAST JOURNEY	339

INTRODUCTION



AARON WEST

INTRODUCTION

Chapter I

On a brilliant November afternoon a little yawl cut into Falmouth Bay.

With her grey sails swollen by a south-westerly breeze, and the flowing tide astern, she swerved around the light-house at Anthony Point and, dancing bravely on the choppy waters, entered the curly green sheet of St. Mawes.

Coveys of white clouds hovered about Falmouth town, hidden in a distant blue mist; the breeze carried away the dark smoke of many steamers in harbour. A great liner was moored by the quay-side, and the black figures of impatient passengers could be seen moving about the saloon decks. Swift and vigilant patrol boats carried boarding officers at full speed through the throng of sea-going craft.

The man who steered the yawl was silent; he sailed his boat, which was his house and home, with a purpose and looked anxious.

If you had asked him whence he came, he would probably not have answered you; a Plymouth boy with him—the only hand on board—had rarely heard him utter a syllable to a stranger.

At daybreak the yawl had slipped her moorings in a rocky creek on the north side of the Cornish coast. She had sailed straight round Land's End, and now she made for St. Mawes' quay; but Anthony Point with the light-house had taken the wind out of her sail. The man skilfully manœuvred her along the outer wall of the quay, and presently the foresail caught

the breeze again. This time it blew from the direction of the Porthcuel waters, which wind picturesquely like an immense river between the low hills of pasture-land and wooded inlets.

The stranger looked backward at grey St. Mawes' Castle—a heap of granite, cold and dismal—before turning the corner of the bay. Years ago, a Falmouth skipper had told him yards of legends about goings-on in the past behind the massive walls of the castle. He had been told how Henry the Eighth had stayed there with his wives, numbering eight. "Hence his number," the skipper had declared. "Once upon a time—" he had begun calmly, but he had ended up with a cold shiver at a legend of ghosts and in his excitement had bitten off the end of his smeary clay pipe.

Years ago the stranger had laughed at the skipper's superstitions, but now remembering them he nodded his head in a melancholy manner and thought that anything might happen in this world. When the castle disappeared from sight, he felt a sense of relief.

The yawl sailed quietly into the shallow Porthcuel waters. A small schooner, a yacht and a vapour boat were moored there, well tucked up for their winter sleep. The sound of hammer-blows echoed across the inlet, coming from the solitary, weather-beaten boat-house of Messrs. Smith and Son, "boat-builders and repairers." It was Smith who swung the hammer through the air, straightening an iron bar; whilst Smith's son sat on a veteran stool with a pot of grease paint hanging by his side, which he brushed on the belly of an old boat, turned sunward.

"Take in the foresail, David," suddenly commanded the man in the yawl, and David Sunbeam from Plymouth quickly sprang up and reefed the sail, whilst his master let down the jib and loosened the jackstay.

"Good old *Shark*," the man muttered to himself. "I don't know how much longer you will float, I ought to dry-beach you for the winter. We are both tired of it, aren't we?"

He looked all around him at the peaceful hills, and his eyes seemed to penetrate the fir-wood coming close to the shore by the inlet. He stepped forward, pushing the boy aside.

"Out of the way, David," he grunted. "That's the spot

where we pass Christmas." He fastened the kedge and anchor. "Put some oil on that old swivel," he said.

David quickly did so. And down rattled the anchor and the kedge.

That's how the *Shark* came to winter in Porthcuel waters.

With her sails down she looked old and worn. Although forty feet all over, she appeared shrunk, tired of hard journeys. Her bowsprit was curved like the finger of an old witch. The oceans had wiped the capital "S" off her name, and there remained at her bow but the "hark."

David called her the Lark.

It was not only the *Shark* who at this moment felt the shortcomings of her old age. Her owner, who for twenty years or so had identified himself with her, felt them more acutely. He was alive and sound, but she was old, seedy, going all to pieces. When fate had led him to buy her, he had said to himself that she would outlive him, anyhow; but fate once more had shown her own will. On many occasions the *Shark* had refused to die a natural death by wreck or capsizing, but now, alas, she was doomed to fade away—before him.

"Good old *Shark*," he repeated, whilst he patiently and carefully adjusted the runners and halyards, "you'd go to Smith and Son's hospital on shore if your master could afford it."

David Sunbeam was busy in the cabin. He cleared away a few empty tins and bottles by throwing them overboard. He pulled out from a corner a mattress and rolled-up blankets. He lighted a paraffin stove and put aside the empty oil can. Then he busied himself in a cupboard, took a basket on his forearm, picked up the oil can and came out of the cabin, saying:

"I must go ashore, sir, and get forage. But we got no dinghy."

The man thought of his dinghy, lost in a storm off the coast of Scotland, and for a long time he gazed into the boy's eyes with a look of pain and sorrow. Then he replied slowly:

"Hey? No dinghy, did you say?"

After a moment of profound silence, he continued:

"Call over to Smith and Son to fetch you."

David Sunbeam shouted for Smith and Son for all he was worth. Young Smith, who for some time had been watching the mooring of the *Shark*, quickly went on grease-painting his boat. Old Smith made a slow move. David's shout had startled him and had made him hit his own thumb with the hammer. A blue blister appeared under the horny nail as he slowly walked towards a small boat, sucking the injured finger.

He got into his dinghy, rowed up to the yawl and looked at the new-comers. He recognised the seafarer and his boat, smiled a rough sort of smile, and said:

"Halloa, Captain Aaron West! Still alive? And how is she" (meaning the yawl)?

Captain Aaron West was too busy to find a suitable answer, he only said:

"Halloa, Smith!"

The dinghy then pushed off with David Sunbeam, basket and oil can.

The captain went about lonesomely and despairingly, inspecting the planks and the masts of the *Shark*. He looked a salty man, in the sixties. His shoulders were extraordinarily broad for his short stature and the length of his body accentuated the shortness of his legs and gave him the appearance of top-heaviness. The calves of his legs were large, and formed two muscular balls showing aggressively through his ragged blue serge trousers. The hair on his head was short, grey and curly, growing closely on his massive skull. His eyebrows were bushy. But there was a deep lustre in his blue eyes, a lustre so strange that Smith asked David Sunbeam, whilst conveying him across to the shore:

"Is your old man dotty?"

At times, when Captain Aaron West glanced across to the land, his eyes seemed fiendish and ferocious, as if he felt a manifest contempt for anything alive and breathing ashore. Only his thin Chinese moustaches, of iron grey colour, weakened the expression of his eyes by their melancholy length and apparent indication of wisdom.

The upper part of his face showed aggressiveness and savage wilfulness, whereas the lower part expressed resignation.

A strange mixture of extremes. That was Captain Aaron West.

His thoughts at the moment were following David Sunbeam, the only human being he trusted and the only sunbeam that lit up his solitary life aboard the *Shark*. That day the boy had given him a letter from his mother, the effect of which had been comparable to that of a bombshell on Captain Aaron West. It told of a mother's anxiety for her son. David Sunbeam must return to Plymouth—"the sooner the better," it said—and "join the Navy." Captain West remembered that he had been the sole proprietor of the boy for nearly two years, having paid him the sum of one shilling and sixpence a week during the first year, together with board and lodging on the *Shark*, and increased the sum eventually to two shillings and sixpence in the second year.

But now he calculated that the discontinuance of the boy's wages would bring him little profit, for, thrown on his own resources, he would have to do all the boy's work along with his own, and cook his own mackerel, herring or cod, or whatever might please to snap at the ever-lurking hook in the deep. And, worse than that, he would have to go on land on certain occasions and draw personally his weekly twenty-five shillings, the income from an annuity which through a lucky idea in his bygone life, when golden sovereigns were piled up all around him, he had bought for himself. He hated the land with its towns and streets and human faces, its dust and bright illusions. People would look at him as he walked along the dismal pavements of the coast-towns, notice his big calves balling out under his pantaloons and his heels kicking in the air behind him; they would point with their fingers at him and say: "There he goes, the man who never learned to walk." He had even forgotten how to walk on land.

Now, the boy had to go: this much was certain. Two letters from his mother had been ignored, had been torn up and thrown overboard, with the boy's consent. But this third letter could not go the same way; it contained a threat. "I shall have to call for the assistance of the police unless my child is returned to me immediately." That meant business.

"Ungrateful urchin," he muttered to himself. "For two years I have kept you, and now you want to go. I daresay you wish to go home, and that against my will."

He dragged out from the cabin a small timber box, smelling strongly of herring and tar, and began to roll up the hal-yards.

"He is a good lad," he continued, "a jolly good lad." Then he wandered off into silent contemplation of the future and thought of the wintering of the *Shark* in Porthcuel waters, when David Sunbeam would say to him no longer, "I must go ashore, sir, to get forage."

The oil stove was glowing and filled the cabin with heat and oppressive paraffin vapour. Captain West became aware that his fingers were blue, his feet frozen and damp from the cold, and there in front of him was the heat being wasted. He crawled into the cabin and seated himself on the old mattress. He rested, and contemplated his riches. There were tea-cups, tin spoons, a coffee-pot, soup tablets, a set of knives, and, in the centre of everything, a silver cup. He felt a longing to inspect his cup, which was without a doubt the most valuable among his possessions, and he was astonished to find it unusually heavy. He rose and weighed it several times in his hand. The cup was much heavier than he thought it should be. A year ago he had made David Sunbeam believe that it was a present from friends in the City of London. David Sunbeam had ever since looked upon the cup with reverent curiosity, for the Plymouth boy had never seen the City of London. It was to him an unknown glory.

The captain dipped his hand into the cup and drew out a paper containing clinking silver coin. It was wound up at the top like a sack of oats. He unscrewed it, and beheld in the palm of his hand a heap of hard-earned, well-saved half-crown pieces. His eyebrows contracted. His astonishment changed to sorrow, then to fear. It was not the sight of English half-crown pieces which caused him to fall back on the mattress, but, no doubt, the paper. Several minutes passed, during which he scarcely moved, but only stared. At last he grasped the handful of silver, and laid it by his side. Then, with trembling hands, he straightened out on his knee

the dirty, shrivelled paper until it became a foolscap printed prospectus. With strange interest the Captain read the lines drawn up by him some twenty years ago:

COLIBRI ISLAND, THE PEARL OF THE PACIFIC

DEAR SIR, OR MADAM,—

Until recently Colibri Island has been unknown to civilisation, but it has sprung into prominence on account of the recent deal concluded between the French Government and Captain Aaron West, of London. The island has become the private property of Captain Aaron West. A special Act has been passed in the French Parliament to that effect. In spite of the wide publicity which the press of the whole world has given to the deal, we feel it is our duty to state some facts concerning Colibri Island, for the benefit of investors.

The latest measurements show that the island has a circumference of about sixty miles. A commission of experts, appointed under Government auspices, have estimated the wealth in copra on the island at the conservative figure of £400,000.

Immense quantities of pearl oysters have been found along the shallow north coast of the island, representing a new field for the exploitation of mother-of-pearl, which is stated to be of best quality.

The Colibri Island Exploitation Syndicate, Ltd., has been formed for the purpose of carrying on the construction of a quay, and to establish machinery for exploiting the wealth of copra with a minimum of labour. For this purpose the Syndicate is issuing 20,000 15 per cent. shares of £1 each. Investors are requested to apply to the Colibri Island Exploitation Syndicate, Ltd., 3, Bow Lane, London, E. C.

As he finished, the paper fell from his knee. He knew its contents by heart.

When the hurricane of fate had blown away every possible chance of happiness from the deck of his life ship, from a dirty little City office he had issued this prospectus. But the world was not to be tricked; it had sneered at the little man in ambush, and, satisfied with that, it had left him stuck in the mud.

This had been Aaron West's last adventure.

He had shaken his fist at God and His children. Then he had counted his shekels—a hundred sovereigns. This sum he had invested in the *Shark*, now his home on the seas, far away from the world. The twenty-five shillings a week kept master and yawl afloat.

Chapter II

Nobody knew why Aaron West was a captain, but the fact remained that everybody called him "Captain."

At the age of twenty-two he became independent. The executors of his father's will handed him a cheque for twenty-five thousand pounds on Martin's Bank, and informed him—not without irony—that a steamer, described simply as *Deborah*, then lying in Liverpool Docks, was included in the legacy. Young Aaron kicked his heels in the air, ran straight to a stationer's office and ordered two hundred visiting-cards for "Captain Aaron West." He made up his mind to get the *Deborah* afloat and to see the world with her.

He took an express train to Liverpool and hurried to the docks. He inquired from every one he met where he could find the *Deborah*.

"Deborah—Deborah?" the people asked themselves. "Who the devil is Deborah?"

Breathless, he arrived at the docks. He looked at the great sea-going ships. Hundreds of great masts were silhouetted against the sky. No doubt the greatest of them all belonged to the *Deborah*. In the distance he saw a man in blue with a white cap—a Customs officer, no doubt. He increased his speed, and slipped over a banana peel that lay in the mud outside a warehouse—which, oddly enough, belonged to Messrs.

Peel and Company, importers of fruit. He rose quickly and caught the Government servant by the sleeve at the moment when his right foot was already on the threshold of the *Jolly Jack*.

"Sir," said Aaron, "sir—sir—excuse me—perhaps you can tell me where the *Deborah* is in dock?"

"The *Deborah*?" repeated the officer.

"Yes," insisted Aaron West, "the steamship *Deborah*."

"I see—I remember," replied the Customs officer. "You mean the old tug boat that had a bust up and was sold by auction for a hundred and fifty quid to Captain West some months ago. You needn't be in such a hurry. She is lying over there, about eight hundred yards off."

He pointed towards her and disappeared through the magic swing door of the *Jolly Jack*, which knocked Aaron flying into the mud.

He pulled himself together again and repeated:

"Tug boat!—what on earth is the good of a rotten old tug boat?"

After some moments of fierce disgust he turned to go back, having for the present seen enough of the docks. This blow of fate set up within him a natural want of consolation, and he therefore made up his mind to drink a bottle of champagne at the Liverpool hotel; henceforth to take matters easy and thus get over his disappointment.

Passing by the derelict *Deborah*, which was floating, her bow broken in half, on the muddy water, covered with a film of oil, he felt an impulse to swear at her.

Later, when he had drunk four glasses of champagne, Aaron thought how nice it would have been if the *Deborah* had proved to be a beautiful yacht; and after the fifth glass his soul flew on board a ship and in his fancy he sailed the great oceans of the world. He went to bed filled with champagne and the burning desire to become a real captain, and in his dreams he sailed forth to a great new world, among shiploads of bananas.

During his morning shave he looked down from the dizzy height of his little room on to the street below, where human beings rushed after their daily bread with ant-like zest. After

breakfasting downstairs, he saw some solemn and impressive gentlemen retiring into a smoking-room, trailing newspapers behind them, with an air of hesitation, anxiety and laziness. To Aaron they offered an apathetic spectacle, contrasting queerly with the bread hunt of those people he had surveyed from his window. He then felt that for himself he preferred to be on the move, to fight, and live; that he would have none of this sedentary, solemn respectability. The harbour and the docks had a strange lure for him, and he went to follow their call. Their damp blackness, foul waters and weird folk drew him from now onwards, day after day, with irresistible force.

Two weeks passed. He saw many strange ships come in from far-off countries, and ships which had become his friends go out into the unknown. He saw a fight, and heard a language sometimes strange and foreign in sound, but nevertheless English. Three weeks passed. Aaron began to make friends with the blackness and its strange children.

At the end of the fourth week he could be seen stepping out of a murky seamen's public-house in a thickly populated neighbourhood at the head of six reeling men, whose eyes gleamed like those of rats! One of them he could be heard to address as "Captain." They jolted along together through some opaque thoroughfares of the harbour-side, and halted with a common jerk at the swing door of the *Jolly Jack*.

"Come in here, boys," said Aaron. "Just let's have one more for luck."

They entered, two abreast.

On the next day Aaron travelled back to London in gentlemanly fashion. He called himself lucky because he was independent and had enough money left to him by his father to back up his independence. The result of his Liverpool visit was that he had become the owner of the *Rosæ*, a hundred-and-twenty-ton schooner, fit to sail on any waters. He had also provided himself with a captain and a crew. A letter had gone ahead to his father's solicitors, instructing them to have the rotten old tug boat, *Deborah*, put up again for auction. He fixed the reserve price at £100. H.M. Customs officer thought that was a good price. West's captain

said—"Why should not some poor devil" (meaning himself) "buy her at that price and make a few quid out of her?"

Aaron West returned to his father's little house in Earl's Court. Mrs. Griggs, the housekeeper, could not make out what had come over young Mr. West. But when he asked her to take his meals into the late captain's room, where she found him studying maps of continents and oceans, and books dealing with nautical problems, she realised that something dreadful and unexpected might happen to her.

But nothing occurred until summer time came. Then one day young Mr. West called Mrs. Griggs, and by the way his face was set she immediately felt that her fate trembled in the balance.

"You see," explained the young gentleman, "I have become a captain, and I am going to sail—going to see every port in the world. Now then, my father used to be a thrifty man, so it's up to me to follow in his footsteps. I can't afford to keep this house going while I'm away, you know—it might be for years—so you will perhaps be good enough to go round to the tradespeople of the neighbourhood and see if you can get for me some wooden boxes—the more the better—for everything is going to be packed up and stored away."

The old housekeeper's eyes, watery by nature, began to overflow. West noticed this increase of moisture, and said:

"As I can't have you stored away in a wooden box, we had better come to some suitable arrangement, Mrs. Griggs."

Mrs. Griggs recovered quickly. The sword of Damocles had fallen, but, after all, her head had not been cut off. So she began pleading rheumatism in the knees, chronic toothache, and varicose veins in her left leg brought on from standing about in the Wests' kitchen and pantry. She knew that all these complaints were worth their money. But her trump card she played last.

"Twenty-five years I have been in this house. Oh, dear, oh, dear! I saw you being born, and—dear me!—I won't stand in your way, Mr. West, not me. Young men likes these changes. But I've grown old in your service, haven't I, Mr. West?"

There was a considerable pause, during which they looked at each other in silence.

Already a great distance had sprung up between them. Perhaps if young Mr. West had known the true soul of Mrs. Griggs, he might have regretted parting from her. But being concerned about himself only, he went to the rickety writing-table and began to think. He added together rheumatism, toothache, and varicose veins and the net value of Mrs. Griggs' affection and good wishes, and then wrote out a cheque for £102. In his mind's eye he saw the spirits of his parents looking at him as he wrote out this large amount for Mrs. Griggs, and when he handed her the cheque he thought that he had fulfilled his duty towards the living and the dead, and his heart became warm.

The old woman shuffled out of the room, rubbing her eyes with a corner of her apron.

* * * * *

On a lovely August day the schooner *Rosa*, newly painted and tackled and rigged, well stored and manned, sailed out from Liverpool into the Atlantic.

Seated in a comfortable plush arm-chair, looking extremely serious and not at all sorry to turn his back on England, was Captain Aaron West, smoking a two-shilling Havana cigar. The sea was smooth; there was just enough wind to help the ship out into the open sea, where, in the captain's opinion, they were sure to pick up a breeze.

Ben Philpot, the cook, stood at the cabin door with a saucepan in his hand. He pointed with it towards Mr. West and called out on the sly to one of the hands who was pulling hard at the bobstay, "Blimy! Look at 'im."

The captain swore by the whole Royal Family that Aaron West was the first man who had ever sailed the Atlantic sitting in an arm-chair on deck of a schooner. He tossed glasses (containing champagne, for luck) with the owner, and said, "If you ain't washed off before New York, sir, them Yank papers will make a blinkin' fine fuss of you!"

Chapter III

The man who had sailed out into the wide world on a plush arm-chair did not return to old England until twelve summers had passed. Then a two-hundred-ton schooner, a different type from the *Rosa*, sailed from the Atlantic Ocean before a westerly breeze into the English Channel, bound for Southampton. She looked a prosperous trader. Everything aboard was seasoned.

Aaron West stood amidships, searching the horizon through a telescope for the white cliffs of long-forgotten England. His appearance had altered; the skin of his face had become leathery and hard, the fierce heat of the tropics glared out of his sunken eyes. When he recognised the white streak of chalk skirting his native land, his hands began to tremble from inward excitement, and tears rolled freely over his cheeks.

"England—good old England!" he muttered, and before his mind stood the little house in Earl's Court where he had passed the days of his boyhood. He recalled a rough but gentlemanly father, a whimsical mother scolding him, whilst Mrs. Griggs stood in the doorway looking down on him with eyes full of water and pity—Mrs. Griggs was dead, perhaps. Captain West wondered if she had spent the £102, or whether she had gone into service again and saved the money in order to leave it to somebody she cared for.

What was it that made the seafarer long to see England again?—to breathe the tonic air of the great Western Island once more after a dozen years spent in cruising over the vast oceans of the globe? What was it that caused his heart to swell with pride?

His old schooner, the *Rosa*, had come to grief years ago off the coast of Chili in a squall. Two men of her crew had been drowned. The others, with Captain West, had been saved and had travelled to Valparaiso. They had had a good time on shore whilst Captain West had looked out for another schooner.

By chance he had picked up the *Amadea*, belonging to a 'Frisco firm in bankruptcy. He had re-manned her and set about buying a suitable cargo. His "Captain" suggested guano, or hides, but Captain West told him point-blank that he would never lend his ship for any such dirty business.

So he took up ballast, sailed straight north to Lima, and within two hours of his arrival there bought a cargo of medicinal plants for a thousand libras, which, he calculated, would be worth one thousand six hundred libras in 'Frisco. In 'Frisco he bought from a German Jew three hundred second-hand sewing machines, and when his "Captain" giped at him about it he told him to "shut up," and gave orders to go ahead for Sydney at once. On that cargo he had made £1,250 clean profit.

It was in Sydney that he had had an adventure, some years back. The old crew of the *Rosa* were dissatisfied with the *Amadea*. His skipper told him that she was clumsy, and bad to manage; that she was much too big for easy handling, and was a rotten boat altogether. West, however, was satisfied with the newly-purchased *Amadea*, and said so. There were arguments, and much rough language, in which West mastered everybody. He told the whole crew to go to hell, and paid them off.

Ben Philpot was devoted to his master, and his grief at being sent away with the other lot showed clearly in his face. Aaron West saw it. He gave him a secret wink and said, "Come back to-morrow, on the sly."

The dismissed crew went ashore in a boat. The Captain—who at the bottom of his heart respected West—knew that he had lost a good job as soon as he had set foot on land. Thereupon he felt sorry for himself and took an unusual amount of liquid consolation. Late that night he was cast out on to the streets of Sydney among a lot of hooligans. One fellow took his money. The Captain shot him through the heart. There followed a battle royal in which he lost his life.

Ben Philpot came back to the *Amadea* on the following day, carrying his arm in a sling, and told Captain West the story.

"Serves him right," replied West. "He thought it was

funny to call me Captain Super-cargo—well, now he's got his super-cargo."

But his throat was choked up when he said it.

When the *Amadea* had put to sea again, bound for Shanghai, she had a new crew, with the exception of Ben Philpot. They were a London crew from a shipwrecked Tilbury brig. Their master's name was Phillips. Aaron West assumed the captaincy himself. Years of observation and experience had taught him the laws of the seas and the elements. The *Amadea* followed his hand like a child; the crew had full confidence in him. West was proud of her, and proud to be her owner. He now remembered that he was an Englishman, a self-reliant Britisher. His heart travelled back to his native land and he longed to see it once again with the *Amadea*.

This was her first voyage in European waters, and when towards evening she entered the Solent and a flight of gay yachts flitted past her like gulls, she looked an exotic, prudent craft. The crew were given a holiday and they went on shore.

Who noticed the sturdy, weather-beaten captain leaving the foreign schooner carrying a small kit-bag, the tears rolling down his cheeks? Who knew the elemental emotion which caused them?

His heart was in his mouth. He thought he knew everybody and longed to shake hands with every passer-by and say:

"Look at me, Captain Aaron West of the *Amadea*,—you co-Britishers. Here I am, back again at home—a jolly long time since we saw one another."

London swallowed him up, welcomed him, as a new one among millions. Aaron West thought that nothing had changed. The outward signs of the onward march of time he never saw. To a man who had mixed with all the peoples of the world, it mattered little whether women's skirts had become wider or narrower; whether men's coats had a slit in the back or not; whether their hats took the shape of the monument or a pancake.

Aaron thought then that in no part of the world had he

felt so much at home, so absolutely right, as in his native city.

Yet twelve years ago he had left it with joy, and when thousands of miles away from it he had sometimes borne a grudge against it for no reason at all. But all that had blown away on his return, and now his arms were wide open and he threw himself on the breast of his mother-country with vehemence.

He felt a duty of kindness towards everybody, the humble and the exalted. He addressed the manager of his hotel like an old friend. To the fair, powdered maiden in the bar he was as kind as a brother. When during the evening he resolved to visit his club, he stood and watched the organ-grinder in Shaftesbury Avenue.

"You still here?" he said to him. "Good old fellow, you've been grinding on for all these years! Aren't you tired of it yet?"

He tossed a patriotic two-shilling piece into the beggar's hat and went on. The flower-seller still spread her corn-flowers and carnations around her at the corner of the Palace Theatre. Not a wrinkle of her face had changed, not a hair had become greyer under her old black straw hat. West bought a bunch of violets and paid with a new shilling piece.

He increased his pace towards the club. There, anyhow, he would find old acquaintances to whom he would have to answer a hundred glorious questions. But on entering the club he became shy and withdrew into a remote corner of the smoking-room. Alas! here all was changed. There were new chairs, new tables, new lights, new waiters and new members; nothing remained of the olden days. Everything appeared smarter. The men were dressed in elegant black clothes. Their faces were sharper and more hollow than those of twelve years ago and expressed hurry and purpose. They looked financial. There was an air of wealth about them. Aaron regretted that for twelve years he had sent in his annual subscription. Where was the good old rough element? Types like his dead father?

He began to feel strange and uncomfortable, but at last some one recognised him. It was Mr. Hazelwood, the old

shipbroker, a member of the "Baltic," and an expert from Mincing Lane. He glared at West with eyes and mouth wide open in astonishment at beholding the old-time member. After a moment of speechlessness, he said :

"Halloa, Mr. West, now I call that a surprise! Where do you come from?"

Captain Aaron West grasped him firmly by the hand, pressing much harder than Mr. Hazelwood liked. They sat down next to each other and lighted up great cigars for which Aaron paid. In sixty minutes they rehearsed what two men had taken twelve years to live through. At the end of the sixty minutes a tall, thin man, arrayed in a smartly cut morning suit, with excellent trousers and varnished button-boots, came close to the corner where they sat talking behind a cloud of blue smoke. He had a large, youthful face, open, melancholy eyes and a soldierly moustache. Mr. Hazelwood saw him and said again, with an air of open-mouthed astonishment :

"Halloa, Mr. Monkton, where do you come from? Allow me to introduce Mr. Aaron West: one of the oldest members of the Club."

"*Captain,*" interposed the seafarer.

"How do you do, Captain West?" replied Mr. Monkton quietly. "Delighted. From the East, I suppose?"

"East, South, North and West," exclaimed Mr. Hazelwood, with an immoderate laugh.

Mr. Monkton, Mr. Hazelwood and Captain West seated themselves in the corner and remained there for another hour. The result of their talk was that Mr. Monkton got to like Captain Aaron West, and suggested that he and Mr. Hazelwood should come and dine with him at his flat in Regent's Park. They could have a little hand of poker, or anything they liked, to follow. West accepted, and the Mincing Lane expert thought it might be worth his while to come too, although he always had "rotten luck" at cards.

* * * * *

As arranged, the three men dined together; West apologised for not being dressed, and admitted, "I haven't got a white

shirt in the world." Mr. Monkton seemed pleased with this frankness. He said, "That doesn't matter between friends, as I hope we are, or may become."

After dinner Mr. Monkton showed his flat to his guests.

West suddenly stood still and gazed at a cabinet photograph of a woman. For a moment he felt as if a pair of living eyes were gazing right through him. Under their stare he lost all sense of privacy. The woman's head was small and shapely. Her lips curled up in a worldly smile. A strong pair of shoulders and upper arms were displayed.

Mr. Monkton watched Aaron with some curiosity and offered him a large cigar. Aaron took it with an absent-minded look. It was clear that that woman's photograph had upset his mind.

The butler brought champagne. Two packs of cards had been placed upon a table in the dining-room. Mr. Monkton went up to the table with the greatest nonchalance. There was a word here, a word there, and the game began.

West lost ten pounds in the first hour; Mr. Hazelwood won ten; Mr. Monkton remained even. At the end of the second hour West was minus five hundred pounds; Mr. Hazelwood had won two hundred, and Mr. Monkton the remainder. For a moment West stopped, looking at the two men. He thought of foul play, but Mr. Hazelwood looked so taken up with the game and Mr. Monkton so pale and gentlemanly that his suspicion vanished. He thought of his journey from Lima to 'Frisco, which had taken two months and had brought him in five hundred pounds. He had lost that now.

The game continued. It soon became reckless. Mr. Monkton was as white as a sheet and began to lose money. West's luck changed for the better. He went on winning and winning until he had won a thousand pounds. Of that thousand Hazelwood had lost four hundred, and he made frantic efforts to win his money back. The early hours of morning arrived. Then Hazelwood refused to go on any longer.

Aaron had won over two thousand pounds.

Hazelwood was now a sorry sight. He suddenly rose up,

bade them good night, and left the house reeling like a brig in a squall. West was much concerned about his winnings, and expressed his regrets to Mr. Monkton, who, however, patted him on his broad back, and said:

"That's quite all right, Mr. West. All's fair in love and games. I'll send you a cheque to the club. But you won't mind, will you, if I go to bed now? I am alone in this place; my wife happens to be staying away."

West looked uncomfortable.

"It seems rather unfair to come and take a man's dinner and his money as well," he said, musingly.

"Don't you trouble your mind about that," replied Mr. Monkton. "Let me show you downstairs. . . . I want to get a breath of air before going to bed."

Mr. Monkton walked out of the room and West turned once more towards the photograph. After a minute Monkton came back and stood in the doorway, and if West had seen his face at that moment he would perhaps have felt that the loss of so much money made a lot of difference to his host. Perhaps he had badly wanted to win money instead of losing it.

"You are looking at my wife," he said, presently.

"Is that your wife? . . . How extraordinary!"

"She is extraordinary," said Mr. Monkton. "I wish you could meet her, I think you would like her. Perhaps—later on. At present she is staying at the *Royal* at Bournemouth to get some sea air. Her spirits got rather low in London. . . . Well, shall we be going?"

"I suppose you go to see her frequently?" West asked carelessly, taking his hat.

"Oh, no, indeed I don't," said Mr. Monkton, with a furtive look. "Business, you know. . . . I have not seen her for over a month. I can't get away. I expect it will be several weeks more before she is able to come back."

Aaron said good night and went off to his hotel.

He went to bed, but he was unable to sleep. He was haunted by Mrs. Monkton's eyes. He had met women of all countries on his world-wide journeys, but had never met such a woman, and—such a strange husband! Had the man

really such enormous sums of money that he could afford to lose hundreds of pounds with a smile? West could hardly believe it. Men who have a fortune do not stake money so recklessly; only men who want to win—who need to win. . . . Was Mr. Monkton one of those? Something, he felt sure, was behind that diabolical game of cards.

Aaron's head ached from the fever of the cards, the champagne, the Havanas. He stretched himself on the bed and stared into the darkness. Presently out of the darkness little gleams of light seemed to appear: they were the eyes of Mrs. Monkton. She was just the woman he could have liked. . . .

She was at the *Royal* at Bournemouth—for months! Her husband had business in town. Strange! . . .

But *he* had no business. . . . Should he run down to Bournemouth? He felt as if he wanted to see her, just to look at her in flesh and blood.

Chapter IV

Aaron could not withstand the lure of those eyes. On the following day he thought he would go to Bournemouth, and therefore purchased a new Gladstone bag, a smart evening suit, and a new blue serge suit of naval cut, and took the first express to that place of fashion. Both the suits were very wrinkled when he arrived at the *Royal Hotel*. He asked for a "decent" room, which was given to him. Then he bathed, put on a new flannel shirt, hung the wrinkled evening coat over the back of a chair, and pressed the trousers between the two mattresses of the bed. Finally he strolled out to the sea front.

"Here I am, back again by the sea," he said to himself. "I don't seem able to keep away from it." And he wondered how long it would take him to find Mrs. Monkton.

At the hotel he dined at a solitary table whence he could well observe his surroundings. He soon discovered the pair of eyes he was after. Their fair proprietress sat at a little table not far off and in her company dined a stranger, a tall,

thin man of about thirty-five, with his back turned to Aaron.

They talked together as if they belonged to each other. At times Mrs. Monkton threw back her head and laughed, showing a lovely set of teeth. Her studied attitudes irritated Aaron, and he began to brood over his dinner; but his eyes were drawn towards her irresistibly, and perhaps she was aware of it. Or was it merely curiosity about the newcomer which caused her to cast an occasional inquisitive glance in his direction? Those glances became more frequent as the *table d'hôte* advanced.

They did not escape the attention of the man with her, who, evidently pricked by curiosity, turned round to see the cause of her distraction. But he only saw Aaron deeply interested in a glass of claret. From that moment Mrs. Monkton ceased her observations. Aaron wondered why. Finally she rose and left the dining-room with her escort.

Aaron criticised her to himself. He thought she wasn't plump enough to be called beautiful in figure. Her neck was long and swan-like, which irritated him. Her arms also seemed a trifle too long in proportion to her body. But her step was graceful. Some of the hotel guests glanced after her, and one or two furtive remarks were exchanged across the small tables. When she had disappeared from sight, Aaron felt disappointed. In his thoughts he followed her, whilst consoling himself with a glass of port.

He began to ponder over his past life, feeling satisfied with the part which he had played therein. His thoughts, however, did not dwell on the past for long, for since he had seen the real Mrs. Monkton his present state was deserving of immediate consideration. Her coming into his way seemed to have altered his steady course; he had never felt so nervous, so excited in mind and body about any petticoat as he did now. He had a premonition of bliss and romantic happiness which the future held in store for him, and which he connected with Mrs. Monkton.

Being totally inexperienced in the ways of the world, he did not see that harm might come to him by sinning, if only spiritually, against the tenth commandment. The fact that she was another man's wife made her all the more desirable

to him. Aaron knew no other commandments than his own; he was one of those contented animals who fulfill their desires without troubling as to whether they degrade their fellow-animals or fall into degeneracy themselves. The only question he asked himself now perturbedly was whether Mrs. Monkton loved her husband.

Nevertheless he slept soundly that night.

On the following morning Aaron saw Mrs. Monkton walking at a distance on the beach with the tall man, who carried bathing towels. He hid himself quickly behind some gorse bushes, whilst his eyes followed her greedily.

She entered a bathing machine; her companion another. Soon she came out, and shaded her eyes with her hand against the glaring sunshine for a while, looking at the tide rolling in. Then she made a few long, graceful strides, ran through the surf, and dived into a billow. She swam out into the long sheet of silver which lost itself in a light haze on the horizon. She was a hundred yards from the shore when the tall man, looking almost like a ladder, and shivering in the light breeze, came to knock at her door. He stretched his neck and listened. West, behind the gorse bushes, thought the man looked like a fool and laughed at him when he walked away, disappointed, to mix with the children, mothers and grandmothers on the sands. He carefully wetted his feet in the eddies of water which were the delight of the children; then walked into the surf like a man going to his doom. When the water reached to his waist, he stretched his long limbs, swam hither and thither, rolled and splashed, appeared and disappeared. Then he returned, looking ever so much thinner than before. A paddling grandmother called him a weed.

Mrs. Monkton now looked like a mere speck in the distance. West could not tell if she were going or coming. He went up the cliff. Perhaps there he might find a telescope. . . .

At lunch-time Aaron saw her again in the hotel. He at once noticed a change in her behaviour towards her companion. She seemed serious, and he upset. They scarcely spoke to each other. Outwardly she appeared none the worse for

her swim. Her eyes seemed to have widened, a healthy flesh-colour forced itself into her powdered cheeks.

She was evidently preoccupied and ignored Aaron now.

During the afternoon the gentleman departed in the hotel omnibus. He was going to London.

Her farewell to him seemed very natural and warm-hearted.

Chapter V

Mrs. Monkton had noticed Aaron before he had discovered her. She had been sitting in the hall when he arrived and had heard him say, when asking for a room, "I don't care what it costs, but it must be damn well decent!" Her eyes had followed with interest his broad top-heavy figure, so unlike any ordinary man's, and she had felt strong feminine curiosity when she had caught a glimpse of his fierce, tawny face. She felt certain that those impetuous blue eyes belonged to a man of the blue seas and had beheld many foreign parts of the world. Aaron's commanding voice, unruly and uncultivated, had fascinated her, and when he had ascended to his room by the hotel lift she had begun to wonder who and what he might be.

Therefore when she saw Aaron in the dining-room the same evening she was already interested in him; in fact, was already beginning to long for a new adventure. She considered that adventures were quite permissible now that her husband had ceased to play an important part in her life. Mr. Monkton had faults which she hated. He could be soft and gentle when he chose, but he was a ferocious egoist. Besides, he was an unsuccessful gambler, and had lost all his fortune. Therefore he could no longer buy the multitudes of articles which go far in making life tolerable, even interesting to a woman like Victoria Monkton. She was one of those materialistic creatures who can only vegetate happily among luxuries. Whilst her hands were full of money, life was sunshine; but with the disappearance of the glistening sov-

ereigns, darkness and despair spread around her, and she became miserable and morose.

At the moment when Aaron came into the hotel her sky was full of black spots, and she considered herself an *enfant perdue*, unless she could find a new banker. She had thought of trying to induce the tall man to whom she had just said good-bye to fill the position. But he didn't interest her, while Aaron decidedly did. So she resolved to conquer Aaron, if possible.

The first words between them were spoken on the night of his arrival.

Finding her sitting alone in the lounge of the hotel, Aaron, who was wearing a dress suit for the first time in his life, came awkwardly up to her, and timidly hazarded a remark about the weather. Victoria replied, and made room for him beside her on the sofa. She encouraged him to talk, and listened with an air of amiable condescension to the narrative of his seafaring life. When Aaron, growing bolder, informed her of his acquaintance with her husband, she was surprised. She gazed upward at the ceiling and murmured, "Poor dear fellow! I can only pity him. That's all!"

"Well," replied Aaron bluntly, "he doesn't seem to need your pity as far as I can judge."

Victoria frowned, then sighed deeply.

"Perhaps I need pity more than he does," she almost whispered.

And she led the conversation to the woes of ill-treated women, and gave Aaron to understand that she was a very miserable being, out of love, out of luck, one of the thousands of female martyrs who suffer because of their husbands' wickedness.

Aaron was deeply moved, but dared not say very much on that occasion. On the following day he made an attempt to talk to Mrs. Monkton about her husband, but she remained silent. Only a look of inexpressible sadness gave him a hint of her agony, and made him feel more sorry for her than ever.

Very soon Mrs. Monkton managed to elicit from Aaron all the information which she desired to know. She found

out that he was unmarried and had a fortune of roughly thirty-five thousand pounds. That figure was a snug little sum and would suffice to satisfy her caprices for quite a long time. She decided to cultivate this blue-eyed man of the sea.

As the days passed they spent more and more time in each other's company. They went to hear the bands play, sat for hours in the public garden and watched the life going about them. Victoria went bathing once or twice, whilst Aaron, unable to overcome a queer self-consciousness, and therefore incapable of undressing and exposing his singular aboriginal figure to all sorts of men, women and children, sat on the beach in his new serge suit, supported his heavy shoulders with his strong arms pitted against the sand, and, sitting thus motionless, gazed after the woman whom he already loved. Victoria saw Aaron's amorous distress and thoroughly enjoyed it. In her secret heart she very soon decided to begin a new life with Aaron as her lover—and banker.

Sunday came and Victoria wore a pretty dark frock and asked Aaron to go to church with her. "If that is her game," he thought to himself, "then I will be. . . ."

"I haven't been in a church since I was a little boy," he said to her.

"Then I feel that I am doing a good deed in taking you there," she replied. "Oh, it is the only consolation for a woman like me!" She sighed deeply and added, "Nothing but religion is left to me! Oh, what have I said? I must not talk to you like that."

Aaron urged his short legs to follow her steady stride.

"Oh, bother religion!" he grunted. "Don't let us go to church. I always get gooseflesh when the organ sets going and the choir begins to squeal. It isn't a place for a mind to rest in. Let's go somewhere else. Let's go for a drive. It's such a fine day. And we'll lie on the sands and have a good talk about matters in general."

"Perhaps we will," she replied hesitatingly, "after the service."

They tramped on and entered the Gothic portal whilst the bells were swinging and ringing overhead. She slipped into a back seat and Aaron sat down next to her, took off his

fashionable, ill-fitting hat, ran his brown hands through his dark curly hair and gazed about him bewildered. Victoria knelt and prayed, and Aaron imitated her movements mechanically. His mind was wandering on the sands, and he decided that he would make a move forward that day, that he would take a decisive step.

During the genuflections of the congregation he suddenly felt Victoria's calf pressed against his, which caused his pulses to beat furiously and his head to turn towards her. But she seemed entirely given up to worship; her touch had evidently been accidental. He felt bitterly disappointed. Later on when they sat side by side her arm slightly touched his, whilst apparently she listened attentively to the sermon. He began to feel desperate.

When at last they left the church she said:

"Now I will go home and get into some cosy country things. I'll put on a loose dress and then we'll ramble about for the rest of the day. Do go and order a carriage to take us away from the town."

"Where to?"

"I should like to go to Christchurch." She shook Aaron's hand, pressed it slightly and smiled at him.

"We can be quiet there," she said, and she hurried away to dress.

Aaron sat waiting for her in the hall, patient as a lamb, for more than an hour. But his eyebrows were knitted, and several people who passed by him going to the public rooms thought he looked a dangerous individual.

When Victoria at last arrived, dressed in a smartly cut white cloth dress which set off her figure archly and lent a telling charm to her neck and narrow face, he rose up in quick excitement and escorted her to the waiting carriage. They started. At first they said nothing. Aaron took off his hat and gazed at the dark auburn hair which protruded from under Victoria's hat, thinking what a marvellous woman she was.

"You're perfectly lovely," he said at last. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on."

"Am I?" she said. For a moment she smiled and looked pleased. Then her face darkened and she exclaimed:

"It's a curse to be pretty!"

"No, it isn't," said Aaron bluntly. "Every woman wants to be looked at, and who cares to look at an ugly woman?"

"I'm not an ordinary woman," she said. "You mustn't class me with them."

The carriage was now in the depths of the country, and Victoria added:

"Let us get out and walk. Let us go into that wood. We can keep the carriage waiting till we come back."

"Right O!" said Aaron.

He called to the driver in his powerful voice. They got out and entered the wood, which swallowed them up. Passing through a tangle of tall ferns and trees they ascended a little hill, from which they could overlook the surrounding green country.

"I'm tired. Let us sit here!" said Victoria.

She seated herself on the ground and Aaron sank down awkwardly beside her. After a moment of silence she said:

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting for such a long time in the hall. But I couldn't come down."

"Why on earth not?" asked Aaron.

"I had a letter from my husband which upset me terribly."

"I wish to God you hadn't got a husband!" grunted Aaron.

"So do I," she replied. "Oh, what would I give to be free?"

"But you are free!" he said fiercely. "Why don't you chuck the man?"

Tears welled up in her fine eyes.

"I say—don't cry!" he exclaimed.

She covered her face with both hands.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Matter! I'm like a bird in a cage. I want to fly—fly a thousand miles away from—him. I want to live. I want—I want to love. And I can't, I mustn't. Oh, God! What shall I do?"

"But what is the matter? What has happened?" said Aaron in great perturbation.

Passion stared out of his eyes.

"What rotters men are!" he burst out. "Selfish rotters. But can't I do something to help you, Victoria? I'm a very bad man. I know that. I've lived a rough life, but a woman like you could make me different. I've never known such a woman. And now I've fallen in love with you, and, damn it, you're married. Lord, what a tangle all my life has got into!"

Suddenly he made a violent snatch at Victoria and covered her face with kisses. She received them passively with shut eyes. Then suddenly she seemed to wake out of a dream, sprang up and walked off at a quick pace. Aaron hurried after her.

"Vic!" he called out. "Where are you going?"

"Home!" she panted. "I can't stay here. I can't trust myself. I'm afraid."

"Vic, forgive me!" he exclaimed, coming up with her. "When a woman is as beautiful as you are it's hard for a man to sit close to her and not have a cuddle. Don't go home! We've only just come out. Don't let's spoil the whole day."

He caught her by the arm and stopped her.

"Look—let's be sensible! I see you don't trust me. But you don't know me—not really."

She gazed sadly into his fierce blue eyes.

"How can a woman who has suffered as I have trust any man?" she said.

"I'll show you how to trust a man," said Aaron. "But first you must tell me about yourself, lots about yourself. You see—the point is—" he hesitated, then burst out—"I don't understand you—not properly."

Victoria looked modestly down, and said nothing.

"I don't deserve your confidence," said Aaron bitterly. "Very well—let's go home, then."

She glanced at him and seemed to hesitate.

"If I do stay will you——"

"I will behave myself, I swear—solemn oath," vociferated Aaron.

"Very well," said Victoria.

She moved slowly on for a few steps, passed through a

tangle of ferns, and sat down with her back against the trunk of a big fir tree. Aaron stretched himself on the grass at her feet and felt for her hand. She let him take it and said, almost like a child:

"Now I will trust you and I will tell you what has happened to me."

She pulled out an envelope, drew a note from its folds, and said:

"This is from my husband. Everything between us is finished—done with. Just listen."

And she read in a low, thrilling voice:

"I'm absolutely broke and can't do anything more for you. Matters between us have come to such a pass that I can't bear it any longer. I don't know what the future has in store for me, but I've no more money to give you, so you'll have to get it for yourself somehow. I'm going to see my brother. But you know what he is. So don't expect anything from him. You'll have to look out for yourself."

Here she stopped, crumpled the note between her fingers and stifled a sob.

"Now you know what a lonely, miserable woman I am!" she said hoarsely.

Aaron raised himself up.

"You are neither lonely nor miserable," he said, with almost fervent solemnity. "Your husband's a brute. But I'm with you and I'm going to stick to you. Fancy telling you—a beautiful woman like you—to look out for yourself!"

"Oh—hush!" she breathed, with a faint smile.

"He deserves it, doesn't he?"

"Ah, but I've been his wife."

"Forget that!" said Aaron, with ferocity. "I'll make you forget. I'll help you. You shan't do a stroke of work while I am alive. I'll do all I can for you—I'll share my money with you."

For a moment Mrs. Monkton's eyes gleamed. Then once more they were veiled with tears.

"We must go home now!" she said abruptly.

They left the wood and got into the carriage.

On the way back to Bournemouth, Aaron offered to pay five hundred pounds into the bank for Victoria.

"It's too much!" she murmured. "Far too much."

But Aaron put his arm round her waist and said, with an oath, that nothing could be too much for a beautiful woman who had been treated as Victoria had been.

"You're in my charge from now on," he said. "And don't you forget it."

That night Mrs. Monkton invited her new banker to her room to have a chat and a smoke after dinner.

She received Aaron with a half-sly warmth. When he had come quite into the room she shut the door softly—and locked it.

Chapter VI

Mr. West and Mrs. Monkton returned to London together eventually and took a snug flat in the *Hyde Park Hotel*.

Aaron had never had such a delightful time as he had during the weeks that followed his stay at Bournemouth. He was deeply devoted to Mrs. Monkton; she was fond of him. They plunged themselves into pleasures. In his wildest dreams Aaron had never lived so happily. He had indeed all he longed for: a fortune, a grand schooner, another man's wife who evidently loved him passionately, and the pavements of gay London under his feet. And when each day of pleasure had ended he looked forward to the happiness in the dark.

After years of solitary wanderings in the wide world, varied by an occasional wild outburst in which his passions had broken all bonds of decency, this new life appeared to him like a heaven of solid respectability.

One day Mr. Cecil Monkton received an anonymous letter telling him of his wife's new arrangements. He became as white as a sheet. An infernal sneer distorted his features and he went into the adjoining room to look at his wife's photograph. He picked up a Sheffield candlestick and smashed the photograph to pieces.

At this moment the butler came in.

"What is it, sir?" he inquired.

"All right. . . . I've accidentally knocked down my wife's picture."

This theatrical outburst cured Cecil Monkton instantaneously. He lighted a "Corona corona" whilst the butler swept up the fragments of Mrs. Monkton; then he went to the club.

On his way he visited his solicitors in Jermyn Street and asked them to have his wife watched and if possible get evidence which would enable him to take proceedings for divorce. The solicitors carried out his instructions, and eventually Cecil Monkton got his divorce. At the close of the case, West was mulcted in damages to the amount of £1,000. He drew a cheque for that amount in court and presented it to Mr. Monkton. Then he turned to the judge and said:

"Are we square now?"

But he received no answer.

West didn't care. He had got the better of Monkton, anyhow.

When he arrived at their flat, Victoria burst into tears. West tried to console her, but Victoria pushed him aside. Then jealousy possessed him, and he said:

"You are not crying about the loss of that fellow?"

She did not answer, and kept the cause of her tears a secret. At last she rose, and putting her arm round his neck, said:

"All my nerves have gone."

West fondled her and kissed her eyes. She let him do as he liked.

But on the following day she refused to go out with him. She was afraid to go to a public place, lest she should see the faces of outcasts of her own sex.

Her name had been wiped ignominiously off the public slate, and her lover alluded to as an adventurer of means. Her heart was heavy within her.

* * * * *

Months passed. The decree was made absolute.

Victoria led a quiet, settled life in the Hyde Park flat

and took to reading Marie Corelli's books. Now and then she spoke of going away, abroad, into a new world of new faces. Aaron assured her passionately that he would go with her anywhere. In his heart he felt intense pleasure at the prospect of taking up his wandering life again, although it could never be the same as when he had been alone. But the great oceans lured him, and he began to plan with Victoria for a new life. They decided to go to Australia. He suggested making the voyage on his schooner, but she was horrified at the thought of travelling abroad in a schooner. She preferred the luxury of a steamer.

So it came about that Captain West ordered the *Amadea* to sail ahead to Sydney, and travelled with Victoria to Southampton to see her off. Once near the sea, he could not resist the spell of its vastness. He became nervous and hurried things. But Victoria was not quite ready yet. She who for months had never mentioned marriage, now took the word into her mouth.

"Do you remember the first time we met you wanted to marry me?" she said, breaking the ice.

"Yes, I do," said West. "But we get on all right as we are . . . haven't we had enough trouble and worry?"

"Trouble and worry!" she repeated, becoming pale from secret apprehension at his off-handedness. But she hid her anxiety with a smile, and said:

"Aaron, dearest, I have given you everything in the world; now make me your wife in lawful marriage. I should feel so much nearer to you if I were married to you."

"But you have been married once already," he replied obstinately. "Did it make you feel any nearer to that rotten fellow?"

"Aaron," she replied angrily, with tears. "I have never loved him—but I love you."

"Then why worry about marrying and that sort of thing? There's no true marriage in the world, but true love."

"Aaron," she said obstinately, "if you love me, you marry me."

"But why?" he asked.

Her secret apprehension rose to secret terror.

"Because I wish it, and if you love me you will consider my wish."

Here she again burst into tears.

Aaron looked at her, wondering how a woman who could swim like Neptune's daughter could cry with such fervour. But he really loved her and her sorrow hurt him. He patted her gently, kissed and hugged her, looked into her eyes and saw her heart breaking behind her tears. How could he be such a fool as to refuse her such a little thing as marriage?

"Of course I'll marry you," he said, almost moved to tears himself.

"But when?" she cried.

"At any time. I never intended not to."

The sobbing decreased. She suddenly straightened her figure and said with a forced calm:

"Aaron, if I couldn't believe you I should kill myself."

"I am glad you do believe me," he said. "I will take the necessary steps at once. And don't be angry with me for causing this scene."

"I am not," she said. "Kiss me."

Aaron wanted to get away on the sea—to foreign lands, with Victoria. So he hurried on the marriage. The altar of God would not receive the sinners, but the red-nosed registrar said:

"That will be quite all right, Mr. West."

Aaron lost his freedom not without becoming aware of the loss. In the registrar's office Mr. Hazelwood, his best man—who still owed him four hundred pounds—slipped a new golden wedding ring on Victoria's finger. Aaron repeated the words of solemn promise: "I take thee, Victoria Cooper, the lawfully divorced wife of Cecil Monkton, as my lawful wedded wife." There was no joy or expectation of a newly married bridegroom in him as he pronounced the words. They sounded like an empty rigmarole to him. A load was placed upon his shoulders which he would have to carry through light and darkness on a life-long journey.

He returned to the flat with Mr. Hazelwood and Victoria. The little party was silent, almost funereal. All day long Aaron tried to overcome his feelings. But there was no

doubt that the romance, the strong element of his love, had vanished at the stroke of the hour fixed by the registrar.

In the night that followed he found some consolation. Victoria loved him more than ever, and he said to her:

"We've had our honeymoon, Vic. But never mind, now you belong to me alone for good. I suppose we shall be happier than before. I've shown you anyhow that I mean to do the right thing by you."

Victoria seemed quite happy now, and said to her husband, candidly:

"The end justified the means, Aaron. I ought not to have done what I did, before you married me, but"—there was a lure in her smile when she said this—"I loved you so much, and I trusted you."

But somehow life was not the same as before. The bare fact that Mrs. Monkton was now his own by law made it seem more ordinary to Aaron. There were no longer secret passions at work. All the longings and wishes of Aaron's wild heart seemed now to be laid at rest in a grave, with a tombstone which told every one: "I am an ordinary married man."

The date of their sailing to Australia was fixed. Aaron took his Gladstone bag and one box; his wife took twenty-three trunks, stuffed with a trousseau of dresses, and what Aaron called "flash millinery and expensive fineries." She departed in great spirits.

They journeyed across the South Atlantic. Mrs. West passed her days in dreary sickness. Her husband tried on her a horse-cure, but without success. Land was the only cure for her. But Aaron was happy. Every day he stood leaning over the rail of the great liner, gazing over the vast ocean. He passed hours in deep silence, seeing a hundred wonderful things happen in nature which escaped the ignorant eyes of the other travellers. He was glad to be alone; he had lots to say to himself.

* * * * *

A year of married life passed like a month; nothing of importance happened. The Wests had settled down in a

fashionable bungalow near Sydney. Mrs. West was hard at work making a gentleman of her husband. She almost succeeded. He joined a fashionable club. The rough skin of his hands soon turned to a fleshy white, and his finger-nails were polished every week in a high-class barber's establishment. His moustaches were cut short. Even his bushy eyebrows underwent a trimming. He began to dress according to the fashion. The rough talk of the seas was reduced to a minimum, and only came out in an occasional fit of irritation over domestic affairs, or when the fast dwindling of his bank balance upset his peace of mind.

Victoria possessed the peculiar charm of the London woman. It appealed to the Australians. Women were curious about her, envied her *chic*, her bearing, her figure and studied expressions. She made friends, organised card parties at the bungalow, gave oyster and champagne dinners and suppers. Artists came and went. The Wests even dined with the Governor of New South Wales.

But inexorable fate would not be tricked. Sir Harold Monkton, Victoria's late brother-in-law, arrived in Sydney on business. His arrival was of importance and was announced in the papers. Victoria was upset for a moment. But Sydney was a large city, after all. They were not likely to meet during his short stay. And if they did, they would simply cut each other.

A little while afterward, Mr. William Fraser, banker, and secret admirer of Victoria, a club brother of Aaron West, invited the Wests to dinner. They went. By a strange coincidence, Sir Harold was the chief guest. The dinner passed off without unpleasantness, but Victoria returned to her home in a silent rage. West took the pill with indifference.

"What have you got to worry about?" he said to her. "You are my wife—isn't that good enough?"

"Are you blind?" she asked, in a fury. "That fellow, Harold, will tell the whole of Sydney."

"And what about it if he does?"

"What about it? Haven't we had enough of it in London? We couldn't even go to a theatre without the people all glaring at us." Victoria made a frightful grimace. "As if it were

God-knows-what if two people fall in love with each other; or a poor woman has the rotten luck to marry a bad husband. You men are all alike—think of nothing else but how to ruin women. Curse you!”

Aaron West laughed aloud.

“Go on, old girl,” he shouted. “That’s the stuff to give ’em. You’ll be a civilised woman in time if you——”

Victoria worked herself into a passion.

“I feel like braving you all, the lot of you. I’ve done no wrong, and don’t see why I should hide my face in this miserable Australia. I’m sick of it. I’ve had to lie low like a sinner, but I’m going to show my face again, whether it is in London, or Sydney, or China.”

Her whole body trembled. There was a long silence. Then West said:

“I agree. I’m sick of this life, too. My schooner is running up and down from China and ’Frisco and Wellington. But there isn’t much profit. Money’s going to the devil. So am I. So are you, Vic, darling. If we don’t make a move of some sort, we shall never get away from this dry place.”

But the Wests stayed on just the same.

The secret of Mrs. Aaron West’s past life leaked out into the world. Her friends were amazed. They were not at all the sort of people who appreciate scandals. She was furious to see them turn against her. She knew whom she had to thank for the sudden change—her late brother-in-law.

Sir Harold, being a man of serious moral behaviour, and having a high standard of honour, had immediately thought of his brother’s honour. He had not hesitated for a moment to believe that Mrs. West had done her level best to vindicate her own cause in Australia at the expense of Cecil.

That was why everybody seemed to like her, no doubt. But Sir Harold thought her a viper. The idea that nobody had troubled to inquire into her past life never entered his head.

He was an excellent man, and important. She was a low-down creature and he wished to give her a ducking. So he stated the facts which had led to his brother’s divorce in no

measured language, and Mrs. West's reputation was ruined in Sydney.

But she remained in command of her wits and made an effective stand against Australia. The cold shoulders and dead cuts she parried with brazen insolence, or a look so firm and brave that the women of Australia began to be almost frightened of her. But eventually her tricks became ineffective by repetition; and finally Australia chuckled at her. This she could not stand. Her heart was full to the brim with bitter hatred. Sydney had become a bad field for her, and her mind reverted to London. Great, happy London! where she could be but a grain of dust! They still had plenty of money. Aaron was right; Sydney was a dry place. But she also remembered another remark of his: "It's only my love for you that's kept me off the water." Supposing his love should cease one day? Why had she never thought of that before? But, even if it did, he was her husband, she could always hold him. He had been faithful to her, she to him. If love for the sea overpowered him, she would follow him.

In spite of all the rumours, Aaron West seemed to keep his men friends. He never cared a brass farthing about any of them, and therefore found them just as usual. Whether a man thought him a clown, an oddity, a ruffian, or a bore, it was all the same to him. One fact, however, made him feel that he was more than other men; that fact was his possession of Victoria. He thought that, in the bottom of their hearts, they all envied him his woman, but she cared only for him.

One night he left home, walked through Victoria Park, down a dark, broad street towards Port Jackson. His thoughts were with Victoria. She had not given him an answer yet about "getting a move on." Evidently she could not make up her mind. By the School of Arts he turned to the left, cast a longing look over Darling Harbour, at the steamers, the brigs and schooners, and thought of his *Amadea*. She might be fighting in a squall somewhere in the Polynesian Archipelago at that moment. His heart went out to his crew and his brave schooner. He looked down upon his starched

shirt-front, at the silk borders of his dinner-jacket, and thought himself a contemptible sort of a fellow to leave his crew and trust the *Amadea* to a hired master.

He buttoned up his light coat and walked on to Pymont Bridge. Sydney was lighted up and all the boats had their "lights going." The crescent was in the sky.

Suddenly a middle-sized, heavy man patted Captain West on the back.

"Halloa, West, old boy! . . . Well, I'll be damned!"

West turned aggressively, looking intently for a moment, then said:

"Well, Garva, old funny-face, watch'yer up to?"

"How's Sydney?" replied Garva. "You don't half look a swell! I'm on the rocks."

"What you done to your schooner?" asked West.

"She's dropped twenty-five fathoms off Borneo."

"Bad luck," answered West. "How much do you want?"

"A fiver will do, old boy."

After this conversation, strictly limited to the etiquette of the high seas, West gave the unlucky Master Garva a ten-pound note. Then they shook each other cordially by the hand and Garva, always rough and ready, said:

"You ain't goin' to get that tenner back, West, unless I strike it lucky. But I'm goin' to tell you something—see? You're a good sort. Mind you don't forget it. Off Tahiti, 350 miles straight south-west, 154 longitude, is a little island that might be some good to yer. There are shiploads of cocoa-nuts and mother-o'-pearl for the askin'. Non-in'abited. It belongs to the French nation. You're a pleasurer on trips—why don't you go an' 'ave a look at the dot?"

"Have you been there?" asked West.

"I? Not I. But I see the island, sailing past, when it wasn't marked on the chart. All them charts is drawn by some goggle-eyed, topographical ass."

"A coral reef, old boy—not worth a tenner."

"It's got a mountain on it—'ow can it be a coral reef? You just go an' 'ave a look at it."

Captain West laughed.

Mr. Garva went his way, a staunch believer in friendship

and humanity. He disappeared in the darkness. From a distance he called back to West:

"Got a wife? 'Ow is she?"

"O.K.," West called out.

Then silence as before.

West made a mental note of the information. Garva had put him on to a good thing once before, so he thought this might be worth remembering.

The islands! Why had he not thought of them sooner? The paradise of the world. If only Victoria were a sailor, he would take her there at once. The islands! The thought of them struck him like a blow, and immediately his mind was made up—to sail. Victoria would have to be taken somehow.

A week after this incident, the *Amadea* arrived in Port Jackson and brought rich silks from China, but small profits. Master Phillips didn't know how to buy. West went to see her at once. She looked in wonderful fettle, fit and proud. He craved for a cruise in her.

Victoria quickly saw her husband's agitation. She knew it was in connection with their leaving Australia. If the object of his plans had been London, she would have spoken at once and said, "Let us go." But she knew it was not, therefore she waited and watched.

Aaron could not hold back his passion for the sea any longer. He tackled Victoria on this vital question. He knew his own future and happiness depended on it. But his peace of mind and body were so closely connected with her that he decided to be diplomatic. Victoria evaded his question, "What about getting a move on?" for the second time. She said neither yes nor no, but talked in a general way of London, sea-sickness, and a liner being safer than a schooner. West let another day slip past. He was afraid Victoria would not give in, and he wavered in his own resolution. He felt thoroughly unhappy. He brooded, and suddenly a lie twisted itself into his brain. Master Garva's island! . . . In a moment he was a happy man again, and thanked the giver of inspirations.

He passed long hours aboard the *Amadea*, closely studying

the Admiralty charts. He visited the French consulate. He bought new instruments and had the *Amadea* provisioned carefully.

Victoria lived in an atmosphere of mystification. She had no access to her husband's activities. She became secretly interested, curious, finally anxious.

One evening Aaron drew away the veil of mystery.

"Vic darling," he said, "we are the luckiest couple in God's world. I'm going to buy an island from the French Government."

"What island?" she asked, astonished.

"It's got no name, but we will give it one, when we get there."

"When who gets there, Aaron?"

"You and I."

"Who says that I'll get there?"

"I do, Vic darling."

"How?"

"With the *Amadea*."

Victoria hid her feelings of horror under a cloud of sadness, which reminded West of Bournemouth. He became nervous about his plan, and went on speaking quickly.

"There's a treasure on that island, Vic. As true as I'm your husband and love you. It's only a matter of getting it. And we will. Now, come—don't be cross. I've made an offer to the French Government to buy it. Their consulate has referred it to Paris. Now, if we find that treasure, we shall be rich."

"And if we don't find it?"

"Well, then——"

She interrupted him.

"Then you will come to London and settle down?"

West blushed for a moment. Victoria smiled.

"Well, Vic darling, we'll see when we get there."

"But I want to know now. A wife can't go schooner-
ing about and be sick for her lifetime. A wife wants peace and a home."

"Everything's ready on the schooner," replied West, getting angry. "A new cabin—a double bed. Let's get away."

"I'll come," said Victoria, with slow emphasis, "if you'll swear to come back to England afterwards."

West took his solemn oath that he would. That one journey was worth anything. His heart gladdened. If only he could go out again on the great Pacific. . . . London was still far in the background.

"Treasure on an island indeed!" said Victoria to herself, when she was alone. "Damn him with his schooner," she added, with a sneer.

Nevertheless he had agreed to take her back to London eventually. The island would soon be a thing of the past.

THE FIRST JOURNEY.

THE FIRST JOURNEY,

Chapter VII

Mrs. West took the precautionary measure of sending all her luggage in advance to London by the ordinary steam-route. Only the most necessary things were taken on board the *Amadea*.

Aaron wanted to give her a surprise, and completed all the preparations aboard the schooner with secrecy. Victoria was to see nothing of them until the day of their actual departure.

The old cabin, which Master Phillips had occupied, stank of rum and shag. So a new one was built. New instruments brightened things up; the deck was washed; the canvases thoroughly overhauled, and a newly-tarred brown top-sail added on the main.

At last the *Amadea* lay at her moorings, ready for the slip, and her crew stood about, hands in pockets, eager for the pull.

The Wests took their last breakfast in Australia in an hotel close to Darling Harbour. Victoria looked enterprising. A blue serge dress revealed almost too clearly the graceful lines of her slender hips, and displayed effectively her well-cared-for beauty. In the anticipation of adventure she felt a momentary lust to sail out on the great ocean. It was nerve tickling, and therefore made her hilarious and bright. Aaron thought no better day could have been chosen for their departure from Australia. The trades blew steadily and drove a flock of cirrus at a high altitude before them. The sea ran smoothly in long sleepy rollers; the sails of the *Amadea* swelled proudly, and her bow cut the waters of the Pacific with eager strength.

Australia soon vanished from sight.

Mrs. West was busy in the cabin. The lust for sailing had already subsided in her, and she began to look anxious. There was no land to be seen in any direction, and the *Amadea* was only a small, frail craft. She ignored the flowers which Aaron had distributed about the cabin, and the garlands which ornamented the door and the bedstead.

Her mind travelled at great speed ahead, to London. Sea-voyages were distasteful to her; she wanted life. Aaron, no doubt, expected her to be very pleased with her new existence on the *Amadea*. He wished her to express her joy and admire his preparations; she had read it in his soul. But she refused to be exuberant and to fall in with his sentiments. She might have done so, to please him, but she was afraid lest he might believe so much in her pretended joy that he might land her eventually in some remote place, instead of in London, or drag on these horrible sea-voyages *ad infinitum*. So she made up her mind, whatever happened, to keep London in the foreground and to remind him of the ultimate goal of their voyage at every opportunity.

Master Phillips was leaning against the foremast, smoking his pipe and thinking. With Captain West aboard he lost his independence, and as he was an experienced sailor, quite at home on the seas, he regretted it. Although he thought a great deal of the owner's nautical qualifications he felt the loss of power acutely. To carry a woman on board was against his high-sea instincts. Her presence upset his balance of mind.

Aaron West was in his real element. His happiness was at its zenith. He had succeeded in combining his love for the seas with his love for Victoria. He wished for nothing more.

He came up to Master Phillips and put his hand on his shoulder, longing for a good sea talk, but he could feel that Phillips' mind was preoccupied, and he guessed the reason for it. So he decided to be kind to him and make him feel at home. He began by addressing him as "Captain."

"Keep straight north, Captain—what do you think?" he inquired, in a kindly voice.

"That's it, Captain," replied Phillips.

"We can rely on this sort of blow for a couple of weeks or so, at this time of the year—what do you think?" continued West.

"We ought to be to able to," replied Phillips, spitting overboard. "A thousand miles further up we'll catch the other blow and knock her round to the right. It'll save a lot of tacking, and means less strain on the boys. It'll also be less rickety for the lady."

West scratched his head. Both men were silent for a moment. Phillips knocked his pipe out on his palm and threw the ashes to the wind.

"You'll keep the log," said West, with a look of confidence, "and see that the boys behave neatly. None of them is allowed to linger about outside my cabin, except Ben Philpot at meal times. And mind you tell them all that if I hear any of them use unconventional language, I'll bash their heads against the main—that'll make them think."

Phillips nodded, and after a moment of reflection said:

"If you'll allow me to say something, sir, her ladyship ought to have brought a maid with her."

"Why?" asked West.

"Becorse—who is going to look after her ladyship when she gets sick?"

West spat overboard. He thought Phillips was right, and replied, "Of course, but my wife refused to bring anybody with her."

Victoria had never mentioned a maid to him, and evidently had not wished for one.

He left the captain to his meditations and went towards the cabin, a feeling of disappointment suddenly creeping up in him. During his talk with Phillips he had found out the difference between imagination and reality. The man represented the seas, his wife the land. And he had united what nature had set apart. He knew from Phillips' words that his crew did not care for a woman aboard. Or, was it only the type of woman they did not like?

No doubt Victoria's eagle eyes had scrutinised them already, and men of the sea have strong instincts and see at once any antagonism to their element. It makes them look upon the

offender with suspicion, and regard him, or her, as a Jonah.

In his own mind West found himself, if only for a moment, taking the part of his crew, and what had before seemed a perfect union of extremes suddenly appeared an ugly disharmony. He knew that Victoria hated the seas and the *Amadea*. She might, for all he knew, hate everybody on board, including, perhaps, herself, for allowing herself to be taken out of her own life and dragged on a vague adventure on the high seas under a false pretext. For a moment West thought: "Let's get it over quickly and, for heaven's sake, get back to England."

But the thought of losing for ever the seas and their wild vastness made him feel sick at heart. He could never give up the seas! Without a schooner life meant nothing!

Dissatisfaction was written all over his face when he entered the cabin to see what Victoria was doing.

She was threading a blue silk ribbon through a costly undergarment, and received him with a look of sharp enmity.

"What's the matter, Vic?" he asked.

"What's the matter?" she replied, with a sneer that made him feel hot and cold. "You've got all you wanted, so what could be the matter?"

"Don't be unkind," he said, with a sincere reproach. "Whatever I do, I do for you."

"For me?" She repeated the sneer. "Why, so you do! Got me out into these morbid, awful surroundings, with a rotten lie!"

"What lie?"

"About that treasure on an island—or wasn't it a lie?" She laughed. "Do you think I am such a puppy as to believe that wild story of yours?—do you?"

West blushed up to the roots of his hair.

"Whether you believe me or not," he said angrily, "I'm going to sail to that island, whatever happens, and have a look at it. If I think it worth my while, I'll buy it."

"And put me down there like a sort of Queen for you to play with and look at—eh?" She laughed, almost savagely.

"What has come over you, Vic?" asked West, bewildered.

"What has come over *you*?" she cried out. "Look!" She

gave him her silver hand-mirror. "Look at yourself in the glass! Where's the gentleman? Why, you look like a 'Frisco skipper."

She paused, breathing hard in her passion.

West looked stern.

"Well? Go on!" he said, with a shake in the throat.

"Call that a life—a respectable life?" she continued. "Talking to your crew as though they were your bosom friends, spitting out left and right, telling me ridiculous lies! I have never told *you* a lie yet!"

She lifted up a book and threw it with violence on to the bed.

"Look at that bed!" she cried out. "Look at it! There's not room for even one in it. How long do you expect this to go on?"

West put aside the mirror, which he had held in his hands. He hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat. White traceries appeared on the surface of his face, and his eyes gleamed nastily. Victoria shrank back from him. He was suddenly a new man, a stranger whom she had never seen before. His voice seemed like ice as he spoke with an effort to be calm.

"Look here, Vic," he said, "if you talk to me as a stranger, I'll treat you as a stranger. Now then! I am captain on this ship, and I am going to get to that island, if I've got to swim the last hundred miles with a plank between my legs. When I have seen the island and made such dispositions as I think fit, we will do as we arranged beforehand, and get back to England. Rotten old England! You shall have your house, and peace and quietness."

His face relaxed to its normal expression. Victoria was quiet, but pale, quelled by authority like a naughty child. She began to cry. But for once her tears did not have the desired effect. Aaron felt secretly ashamed of his lie, and now bullied up his temper to screen his feelings.

"As to criticising my appearance," he continued sternly, "you can't expect me to wear a silk hat and a frock coat here. I think you ought to consider me a little more, however diffi-

cult you may find it to do so. In three weeks' time, if all goes well, we shall be at the island."

Victoria cried louder:

"In three weeks' time! I shall die—nothing but water, water, water. That's all there is!"

"You can't sail a schooner in the air!"

With these words West turned round and flung the cabin door in the lock behind him. A look of impotent fury followed him.

After this upheaval, Mr. and Mrs. West scarcely spoke to each other for several days. Aaron passed the weary hours with Master Phillips and the crew, who quickly discovered that there was something mysterious between Mr. West and her ladyship.

Victoria now had the state cabin all to herself, hardly ever left it, and read until late in the night.

The *Amadea* quickly made headway and the heat became oppressive as she gradually entered equatorial waters. Every morning the sun rose in a vast glory of gold and burned fiercely until he settled down again, arrayed in a beautiful mantle of every imaginable colour.

Aaron slept in a hammock on deck, banished from his wife's presence, yet crazily longing for it. He gazed up to the stars, listened to the trades blowing through the rigging and the canvas that rose up before him like a sinister wall. He was far from being a happy man; and, companionless, sleep failed him. He was dissatisfied with everything.

On one or two occasions he had tried to bring about a reconciliation with Victoria by a sad, kindly look, or a friendly word. For instance, he would go to the cabin on some pretext and say to her: "You've not become sick yet, Vic—you are a first-rate sailor." But she would only remind him with a look of the wall between them, and say: "I'm sick up to here," pointing to her throat.

The futility of such attempts enraged him more than ever. She was obstinate and continued to spoil his journey with her dogged firmness.

"She wants to go on land, and I want to go on the sea, and there's an end to it," he thought. "And until we get to

that damned London she will not be herself again—so for heaven's sake let's get it over."

He felt sick at heart. It seemed his destiny, after all these years, to become a settled down land-lubber, to have to give up his life to Victoria. But in his heart he swore he would make her suffer for it somehow.

Chapter VIII

One night West entered the state cabin where Victoria was reading *Germinal*. He held the Admiralty chart in his hands and said:

"Vic, to-morrow, towards late afternoon, we shall sight the island."

She shut the book and looked at her husband wearily.

"At last—thank God!" she said, with a sigh. "How you men can find a spot on this watery desert with a map passes my comprehension."

"I can show you," said West, eagerly.

But she waved her hand, as much as to say, "Don't bore me with your nautical knowledge," and remarked:

"To me it doesn't matter which island it is. We've passed a thousand, I should think, by now, and every time I see one it raises false hopes in my heart."

She paused, then continued:

"A good steamer would gladden me more than anything, but one never sees one here. Are we so very far out of the course of ordinary shipping?"

"A good way," replied West. "Perhaps once in a year one might see a French man-o'-war about these waters, calling at the islands, or looking over them with a telescope to see if there were any wrecks or derelicts."

"Then which is the nearest port where ordinary sea traffic passes?" she inquired.

"I should say Fiji. That's on the course to 'Frisco. Or, perhaps, Tahiti, but I believe the mail calls there only once every three months."

"How far is it to get from Fiji to the island?"

"Not quite a thousand miles."

Victoria sighed.

"A thousand miles," she said. "It's enough to turn my inside round again. Tell me, for heaven's sake, do we have to sail another thousand miles to see Europeans?"

"Yes," replied West.

"This is awful," she replied, and was silent for a moment, considering. Then she continued: "How long shall we stay near the island?"

"I must have time to look over it. There might be wealth there, of which the French Government knows nothing. It's up to me to find out. No map has been drawn as yet; in fact, on the Admiralty chart it is dotted down as a dangerous reef. But the annals don't show any shipwrecks."

"I ask myself, where will all this end?" replied Victoria. "An island—nobody has been on it, or knows where it is, yet the French claim it. Nobody is supposed to live on it, and, for all we know, some monkey-like savages might receive us with open arms and cook us all alive."

"If there are any savages," replied West calmly, "which is quite possible, although they would hardly be man-eaters, it's up to me to deal with them."

"What will you do, then?" asked Victoria. "Take your crew with revolvers and shoot them all dead?"

"No," said West, looking straight into her eyes. "You don't quite know me yet, Vic. You have nearly always seen me on land, and I have never seen you on my schooner until now. It's only natural that we should be as different as land from water. Yet land and water belong to each other."

They both seated themselves on the bed, and he took her hand in his.

"It's quite true," he then said, "I got you into this adventure under a false pretext. But never mind. You've forgiven me, and ever since I have felt that I belong to you more than ever before. Now, when I land on the island, I shall take neither revolvers nor the crew with me. That's old-fashioned. That's how they did it when civilisation began. It would have just the wrong effect. I've been thinking a

good deal lately, Vic, and I've come to the conclusion that we are the bringers of civilisation to this island. Supposing I saw a chance to exploit its wealth for our benefit, the savages would benefit also. If I shot the lot of them, it would mean that I should have to import labour, which is dangerous and costly. Why not score by training the natives to work and paying them at a low rate for the work they do?"

"But if they refuse to work?" she interrupted.

"If they refuse to work? Well, then they must be made to work."

"How can you make them work?"

"Well, we must force them to work. Civilisation demands it. I think everybody ought to be made to work. It's only fair to the community. Work brings civilisation, nothing else does. Look at Europe. Everybody in Europe does some sort of work. That's why we white people are such a civilised people. I feel the responsibility of being a representative of civilisation."

"So do I," replied Mrs. West. "But I am longing to return to it myself. I'm not fit for this sort of life. I'll let you go alone on to your island, as you wish. When you have satisfied yourself, we will sail for Fiji and catch a steamer. You agree to that, don't you?"

West frowned, and was sad.

"I suppose we must, Vic," he replied. "There's no other way, is there?"

"No," she said, with a hard smile.

Aaron said nothing more. He resolved to make the best of the moment. England and London were still far off. He would surely go to them, would reach them as every man finally reaches his death. But while this sort of life lasted, he would make the most of it.

If the island were valuable—which it might be—he would drive a bargain for it and float a syndicate. Perhaps at a later date (he rejoiced in the remote hope) he would be forced by circumstances to return to it, and supervise his property.

So there would be no need to get rid of the schooner after

his arrival in England. The *Amadea* might go on her cruises as before and earn her own living.

Sure enough, whilst bowing to his fate, Aaron West hoped to play it a trick. Sure enough, he had not given up the seas in his secret heart.

At 2 p. m. on the following day, land was sighted to the north-east.

The island! It electrified him.

The air was of transparent purity, but hot and damp. Three telescopes scanned the horizon, fixed upon one particular spot. There seemed to be a small black object, just rising over the waves of the ocean, washed by a white streak of breakers. West felt a sudden pang in his heart.

"It's a common reef, sure as I am here," he said, with a trembling voice, to Master Phillips, who stood by his side.

"Looks like it!" replied Master Phillips. "Thought it would be."

"That Garva!" groaned West, clenching his fist, "he's been playing a rotten joke on me. I'll break his neck!"

"You ought to," said Phillips drily.

"We'd better get closer up to it," said West, with a spark of hope in his eyes. "Perhaps everything is hidden behind the reef. It'll be difficult to manœuvre a landing, I can see that."

Standing close to her husband, Mrs. West also gazed through a glass. A triumphant smile curled the corners of her lips whilst she thought what fools men were. And they didn't seem to mind! they took it into their heads to do a thing and never minded the consequences. They *were* fools!

She gazed upon her disappointed husband with a smile, and could almost have fondled him in his plight, so great was her inward joy. What a fiasco to finish up a nautical life with. Now London would be the only anchorage for him. There he could tell his story of the island as a joke. It was a splendid joke—a coral reef.

"Ha, ha!" she burst out laughing. "Aaron, dearest, where's the island?"

"Wait," he replied curtly, with suppressed ferocity, continuing his observations through the glass.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Victoria. "Don't you think we had better turn the ship round at once and sail for Fiji? It will save time."

"Shut up, for goodness' sake!" he replied. "What do you know about navigation?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Victoria.

Master Phillips had disliked her ladyship from the moment she had set foot on board, but now he definitely hated her, and his eyes expressed it openly. Mockery at this moment was worse to him than blasphemy.

Victoria, however, went on laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha! Haven't you perhaps made a mistake in your charts, gentlemen? Perhaps it is somewhere out *there*!"

She pointed in the opposite direction.

Master Phillips ignored her.

Aaron grunted angrily.

"I am not going to lose my temper more than I can help," he thought. "After all, she has reason to laugh at me. I *am* a fool."

"If there's nothing hidden behind that reef," he said aloud to Phillips, "I'll sail straight back to Port Jackson and wring that Garva's neck."

"At any rate," replied Phillips, "we ought to sail around the atoll, get up a little closer if we can. A landing looks impossible. The breakers seem to wash over every bit of land there is."

"Yes, we will sail around," said West.

At 4 p. m. the island lay to the north-west.

West shouted for Master Phillips.

"A mountain—a mountain! Look!" he cried, trembling with excitement.

Master Phillips looked. He saw a rocky peak pointing skyward at a distance of several miles behind the reefs. The lead showed forty fathoms of water. The *Amadea* was turned to port-side and tacked northward.

Victoria leaped out of the cabin and saw the peak without the glasses. It appeared and disappeared alternately with the rise and fall of the rollers, and looked no more than a little piece of coal in a basin of white foam.

West grasped her hand with fervour.

"I am so thankful," he said, "so thankful that I have not been done in the eye after all."

"I am very glad for you," she replied. "It made me quite miserable to think that you had come all this way for nothing."

"The question of landing is the difficulty now," said West. "We must be jolly careful or we might be bashed against the reefs and perish, the lot of us."

"Now, tell me, Aaron," said Victoria, "what is the good of trying to land at all? Let us go to Fiji and get home. When will you have had enough of all this schooner-ing about and risking our lives?"

"We shall find a landing-place," he continued, unperturbed. "It only needs patience and a good look-out."

Victoria sighed and looked around with eyes full of pity for this obstinate world.

When the sun began to set that evening, the *Amadea* was tacking east of the island, three miles off. Wild breakers could be seen bursting against the solid coral reefs with relentless vigour. Yet these passive builders of islands withstood them like solid rocks. The surf foamed over their delicate and exquisitely coloured structures, tossing about flakes of limy coralline, which the fierce heat of the sun had cracked and caused to break off from myriads of dead colonies of the strange polypus. A mountain, rising to about a thousand feet, pointed skyward like a needle and was bordered by a sulphur yellow outline. It seemed as if the great fire-ball of the setting sun was pinned on to it. At its foot a strange purple darkness indicated shrouded woods and valleys.

A dense flock of birds, forming a compact living cloud, came flying from the island, and hovered over the *Amadea*, shrieking as gulls do. They caused great excitement on board, but when the sun sank into the Pacific and the short twilight drew a veil of mystery over everything, the screaming bird-cloud swept back to the shore, only a few inquisitive stragglers remaining behind to roost on the rigging of the foreign schooner.

West aimed at one of the birds with a fowling-piece. It fell on deck, beating the air with its wings like a whirlwind. He shot again, and the bird was still. He looked at it in bewilderment. It was a savagely beaked, aquatic bird with a wing span of six feet. Its eyes, still wide open, looked at him in the twilight with savage, impotent rage. Its gaze almost frightened him; its stare seemed to echo the explosion of the gun in his ears. There was ill omen in its last dying blink: the sinister accusation of a murdered creature, deprived of its life by the hand of a white, civilised man. Aaron looked up at the main and saw other birds, their heads hidden under their wings, roosting confidently, ignorantly. Their feathers, ruffled for cosy warmth, fluttered in the night wind. He reloaded his piece and shot two more of them. It was a joy to kill these savage-looking, ignorant things. Had not God made man to rule the Universe?—to enforce his powers on the weak and ignorant?

“Quite so!” Aaron applauded himself.

The crew cast curious, inquisitive glances at the carcasses spread out on board. Ben Philpot slipped his fingers under their feathers, and said, “All I can feel is ribs, ribs, ribs—no good at all for cooking.”

Victoria kicked one of the dead birds with her elegantly shod foot, and said, “How awful they look, these things,—they bore me to death.” She returned to the cabin.

The lean corpses were thrown overboard, and for a while they floated on the deep blue waters; then suddenly there was a rush, a gurgling sound, and they were drawn down into the deep.

On the following morning the island had disappeared from sight. Fearing to sail too close to the reefs, Phillips had kept out seaward. Now he gave the order, “Ship about,” and after a cruise of two hours the island was sighted again. This time they sailed—north to south—along the western shore. A sharp look-out was kept for an opening, reef-channel or bay, but nothing was seen but reefs and mountains of white surf. At one time the lead sounded barely two fathoms of water, and immediately the schooner was set to the windward to prevent grounding. The tide was out

and the waves were washing hidden coral rocks which studded the sea all around. At moments the staunch skipper's heart trembled.

West never took his eyes from the glass. The joy of beholding the island, mingled with the fear of the impossibility of landing, excited him terribly. Never had he known such nervous tension, such a savage longing to conquer everything. Secretly he decided to land in one of the boats, at whatever cost. Rather would he be bashed against a reef, or eaten by a shark, than give up now. It mattered little what Victoria might think. He knew very well that she did not take the slightest interest in his undertaking. He could not help that. She cared for him in her own particular way.

"Aye, aye!" cried Phillips. "There's a hole. Aye! Aye!"

"Where?" said West.

"There! . . . Look!"

They both scanned the reef carefully, and there—towards the south-east—was a wide opening, a deep channel which parted the walls of coral.

"It looks a regular entrance," said Phillips, without taking his glass off the spot. "A first-rate mouth, like a harbour. The east reef stands out like a breakwater. Have you ever seen such a lovely entrance? If we turn to port-side we can sail straight into it with the blow from behind. It must be half a mile wide."

"That's all very well," replied West, assuming command. "It looks all right, I can see that—but what about the depth? It may be as shallow as the east coast."

"Never fear. Let's have the leads out and get the main and top down. Drift in with the jib."

"And get stuck at the last moment," replied West. "No fear. Let's get a boat out and take soundings."

This idea impressed Phillips and he set about executing it. The reef channel was found to be twelve fathoms deep. A man-o'-war could have entered the lagoon; not a doubt of it.

In the evening the *Amadea* was moored in the lagoon, and the seafarers gazed around, wondering at the majestic solitude. From afar the hollow chorus of thundering breakers

echoed across the reef, where the surf was active day and night.

The stars shone brightly, and the *Amadea* rested in peace.

Chapter IX

There was heavenly stillness in the early morning. The sun rose over the reefs and the boiling surf; puffs of white clouds moved slowly onward in a sky of ultramarine blue.

A whaler pushed off from the *Amadea* and Aaron began rowing towards the shore. He was alone. He wanted to be alone when he set foot on the island for the first time.

In the crystalline clearness of the air the shore seemed but a mile away from the schooner, but Aaron took nearly an hour to reach it. The *Amadea* became smaller as the distance between them increased, and finally appeared a mere speck nestling against the barren reefs.

A narrow girdle of sand, glistening like mixed gold and silver dust, skirted the shore, and the whaler cut into it with a singeing sound. Aaron pulled the boat ashore and stood still for some time. Nothing disturbed the silence surrounding him. He shaded his eyes with both hands, and looked with awe at the variety of natural beauty before him: groves of tall slender cocoa-nut palms, bread-fruit trees clustering together in huge clumps. In places their branches, clothed with dark green, glossy foliage of immense size, hung over the still cobalt waters of the lagoon. At a distance he could see through a natural framework of exquisite trees a mountain of basalt towering up with startling boldness; and a deep and lonesome glen where a cool stream was flowing, here silently and peacefully, there dashing in exuberant cataracts over the rocks strewn in its way in romantic confusion.

A sensation of admiration and bodily delight sent a boyish flush into Aaron's cheeks. He stepped forward with his arms flung open, like one walking in a dream. The heavenly purity of nature roused his elemental instincts; the exotic air

enraptured him, bewitched him. It was to him as if he had never lived before; indeed, he forgot whence he came, whither he was going. He was like a child just born in Paradise. Every now and then he would stand still, take his cap in his hands, and gaze up into Heaven, as if he were almost expecting God Himself to come down into all this beauty and speak to him. A silent, unconscious *Te Deum* went up from his innermost heart.

Again and again he looked with longing towards the distant mountain, its sublime outline and unearthly hues. He could hear no sound but the excited beating of his own heart. All things around him were blended in the most perfect harmony of nature.

The flowers and trees, irregular, spontaneous and luxuriant, sustained by a prolific, rich-smelling soil, captivated his eyes. They nodded to him, and invited him into their genial midst. His lips piously touched their mature gloss. Tears welled into his eyes and fell among them.

It was Adam who shed tears. Adam, after thousands of years of wandering in blackness, had returned to his paradise; Adam, who had wandered through the wide world sinning and plotting against his Creator and his own creed. His skin had become white, he was a member of the great white civilised world, emancipated, elevated. He had used selfishly the gifts of the Almighty Father, progressed on a terrific scale in every way, and now he returned to the majestic solitude of God. And in his soul were regrets and sorrows at the sight of what he had missed.

He stumbled into the forest. The earth was covered with thick-spreading, forked roots, brambles and multi-coloured creepers, and was overgrown with a velvet carpet of moss. Trees rose like Corinthian pillars supporting a canopy of interwoven boughs and verdant foliage, through which the rays of the sun made an inquisitive search.

There were no trodden paths in this place so unlike the ordinary haunts of men. A bird chirped among the branches of a bush, another answered from near by. They darted towards each other, nestled together and loved each other. Their plumage glittered in the shade. Aaron started and

solemnly held his breath, then advanced again with the enchanted steadiness of one whose mind is asleep but whose senses are awake. At every step he beheld a new secret, and indefinite space grew between him and his former life.

He became conscious of his own greatness in this solemn paradise. There was surely no world outside its boundaries. The petty sorrows and passions of his soul were banished, he became spontaneously primitive. His instincts were intensified under the power of the spell, his senses enraptured by it. He was like a boy whose soul had dwelt blindly in the innocence and darkness of childhood, whose heart for the first time whispers the secret of love, who with sudden awe recognises the purity of the virgin. Aaron's arms opened longingly, despairingly, as if to grasp to his bosom the wonderful island. Like the boy whose heart longs in lonely sickness for the kiss of the virgin, so he craved for a mute exchange between his soul and this land of marvels. No thirst or hunger of the body would ever make him suffer here. He could pluck the exquisite fruit ripening within his reach, could kneel and drink from the crystal stream.

Yet Adam's happiness was not without a flaw. He had never atoned for his sins. He could not walk and enjoy, look upon the strange flowers and the mountain with the serenity of their Creator. The serpent crept out of his own heart and hid among the glossy leaves. It wound its way along invisibly wherever he went. It led him on. It reminded him that he was but a mortal man, whose time was a tick in eternity. It urged him to remember that and to hold out his hand and pick every flower, to tear the fruit from the trees—to value it all as his own.

"It is all here for you—take it," whispered the serpent.

But Adam picked neither fruit nor flowers. The All-presence of God made him fear, lest he should be expelled from Heaven once more and flung on to the dusty roadside where humanity staggers along towards the unknown in hopeless confusion.

Presently Aaron arrived at the stream that gurgled past his feet singing a happy melody. He stood still, gazing into its translucent purity. A flock of iridescent birds rose from

a thicket and chirped all round him. Some of them flitted by his head, rested on the stones by the stream-side, or on the twigs that overhung its borders. They gazed at him with eyes of acid life and wonder. Aaron bent his head.

The serpent crept near to him and whispered, "Do not regret, great white man. You killed last night. You were right. God made you strong to slay the innocent and weak. Do not be a fool and regret it."

Aaron paid no heed to the voice. He bent his knees and moistened his burning forehead with the fresh water. He looked up to Heaven and was torn by regret at having killed the great gulls. He hoped God would forgive him. But the serpent whispered again:

"Silly great man, to regret. Your heart is weak and divided. You are master in the world—so take, steal, kill, and drive from your heart the mystery of the unknown God. You are supreme, the greatest of all there is."

Aaron listened to the voice, seated himself on a rock in a shady grove, and meditated. The serpent had awakened his powers of reasoning. He became conscious of his importance.

The serpent withdrew into the secret shade of the forest. The sun had long passed the meridian and its rays broke on the glossy leaves as on mirrors and darted into the thickets. The air was pregnant with intense heat. Aaron rubbed pearls of sweat from his forehead and closed his eyes, feeling like one transported into eternity where times counts for nought. But suddenly he awoke as from a trance. The serpent had returned to his side, and was smiling at him cunningly.

"There was a time when my heart was undivided," said Aaron to the serpent, "a time when it was pure, ignorant, consecrated to the unknown and disclosed to nobody, a time when I was a child. Then you, serpent, entered into it, took possession of half and filled it with blackness. The other half remained as it was, ignorant, sacred to the unknown, but now you have given it knowledge. I wish sin had never entered into me, that I might remain here and enjoy this paradise with an undivided heart."

But the serpent whispered:

"Silly great man. You have sinned, and sin cannot be wiped out. You are weak and suffer for it, but now you must decide whether you will continue to suffer or not. Your eyes wonder at this beauty, your ears listen to the music of the stream. Your heart desires to possess it for yourself—so take it. It is yours."

"I cannot," replied Aaron. "It is purity I long for. I must purge my heart and become better. Sin can be wiped out, but I feel it requires strength and help from the unknown to succeed. Now I have recognised the good in myself and I wish to adhere to it. Leave me alone."

The serpent withdrew. But it smiled more cunningly than before.

For a while Aaron in thought returned to his former life; to his boyhood; to school where he had received lessons in Scripture; to his lonely journeys all over the globe; to London; to Bournemouth. In his memory rose a thousand pictures which he thought lay centuries behind him. Again he saw everything with the ordinary eyes of the great civilised world. He recalled his purpose in coming to the lonely island, and began counting the cocoa-nut trees, but there were so many that he lost count of them and could only guess at their number. He wondered what that mountain hid from view, how it was that no native crossed his path. Sudden fear of a poisoned javelin whistling through the air made him look round with nervous anxiety and feel his pocket where a revolver was hidden. He thought of a venomous little snake which might fall from the green labyrinth over-head and bite him, kill him—or a creeping scorpion that might sting him. But nothing happened.

The sun was travelling in mid-afternoon. If he could not see everything to-day, to-morrow or the day after he could renew his lonely wanderings.

Aaron went to the stream and drank; then he picked a large orange, skinned and ate it. It tasted sweet and smelled strongly, but unlike other oranges. Little silver fish darted out of the shady nooks of the river and flashed lightning-like

through the clear water whilst he made his way downstream, stepping from stone to stone, in a westerly direction.

He made up his mind to turn over a new leaf and to become good.

In the enchanting solitude he became aware of God without and of the good within himself. It appealed to him strongly at the moment. He did not know how much there was of it, but he resolved to give it a chance and try to overcome wickedness. He had set out to find a rich island, and had discovered a paradise for his soul. He felt he could be happy—he needed nothing more—he could come and live here, forget the world, the count of time, and when he died pass from one paradise to another.

He had followed the gurgling stream for some time, and now arrived at a precipice where the water bounded into the air and fell into a deep pool, forty feet below, forming a gentle arch of myriads of rainbow-coloured drops. From that pool it fell in cascades to the vale, and formed a second shallow pool in which the evening sun glistened; thence it flowed onward through prolific soil and rushed towards the lagoon in the far-off distance.

Aaron seated himself. He was exhausted by his journey in the fierce sunshine. He took off his boots and bathed his burning feet. He did not wish to move another inch. There was a new world parting him from his schooner, and he shrank from the thought of returning. He was happy as he was; he could have lain down and slept, to wake and behold anew this Eden. With dreamy eyes he scanned the mountain, the forests, the water of the stream, the blue sky, and the sun nearing the great ocean. There was still time to return, but he remained, giving himself up entirely to the charm of this magic island.

Suddenly he started up, and fixed his eyes intently on the shallow pool below him in the distance. There was a human being, standing motionless, staring into the silent water. He could not see if it were man or woman, for it was covered by a long loose cloak. Indeed, so unexpected, so seemingly impossible, was the appearance of another living soul beside himself, that Aaron wondered whether his eyes had not de-

ceived him. But, sure enough, the figure moved. It stripped off the cloak, a waist-cloth and a pair of shoes, and walked into the pool, carrying in its hand a small basin containing some liquid which it rubbed into its skin—a skin such as he had never seen before. It shone like polished gold in the great flare of the evening sun. The outlines of the figure were grand and classic, and when it turned sideways revealed a woman. The lights and tender shades were those of a woman. Aaron could see the sun dart off her shining breast. Her slow movement, the ideal shape of her body, in harmony with the enchanting surroundings, inflamed his imagination.

She was a beautiful queen—a goddess! He closed and opened his eyes in quick succession, to make sure that she did not disappear like a spirit. But no! She rubbed her body, and her movements were gentle as those of a snake-charmer. She filled her hollow palms with water, which she poured over her shoulders.

A delightful coolness surrounded Aaron. He could feel bodily the freshness of the little stream, so much was he engrossed in the spectacle. Perhaps the intensity of his thoughts was transported to her—perhaps her instincts scented the presence of man—for she turned her head towards the great arch of falling water and no doubt saw him standing high above her. Could she see the straining of his eyes, his absorbed stare?

Aaron expected her to dive—to rush towards the bank and cover herself with her cloak, or to sign to him, shame-stricken, to turn away his eyes. But she did not. On the contrary, she held out both her arms and came towards him, wading up to her thighs in the water.

“Now I am certain it is a hallucination,” Aaron said to himself, and he closed his eyes for a long while.

When he opened them, the figure had disappeared, but the silent pool was not the same peaceful, shallow water as before. It had become mysterious and deep, and with tearful heart Aaron longed to see the water ripple and the golden virgin rise up if only once more to hold out her arms to him. He looked down below where the cataract struck the ground, and determined that if she appeared again he would dive

down and be swept along to her by the water. . . . He would be haunted by that vision until his last day.

For a moment the serpent came close to him, gazed at him sternly and then began to withdraw.

Aaron cursed the snake.

"Why do you follow me, you wicked evil?" he said angrily. "Is it you who play tricks on me? Is it you who wants to tempt me?"

But the serpent only smiled cunningly and whispered:

"Stupid white man! It is woman offering herself to you, desiring you. It is no phantom, it is reality, it is flesh and blood. Take it! and no longer distrust me. I will lead you faithfully."

Aaron said no more. He felt bitter in his heart and looked towards the setting sun which hung over the distant ocean like a great, terrible torch. There was a noise in the bushes by his side, like the soft tread of a puma. Aaron started in terror. Would the wonders never cease? Would his soul not be able to rest? Could he not remain quietly where he was, lay his head on a stone and dream of the golden virgin?

There was a crackle of twigs breaking under a carpet of moss. Aaron flung himself round violently. The glossy drooping leaves of the thicket were parted by two beautiful hands. There appeared a small shapely foot, clothed in a sandal of matting; a thin wiry ankle, a beautifully formed calf and knee veiled by a cloak of fine white transparent cotton; and then—the golden daughter of Eve. She looked at him with large eyes of deepest velvet brown. There was no fear, no hesitation, no curiosity; nothing but calm, purity and sorrow in their quiet shine.

Over the tender brows arched a forehead of ivory, a dome full of wisdom and charity. Her hair of soft, rich black had a marvellous gloss of freshness.

Her nose was straight, Greek, sensitive; her lips and chin were full and strong, drawn in ideal harmony with her eyes.

So expressive, so beautifully powerful were her features, so necessarily belonging to a body of exquisite shape, that she seemed to be the transfiguration of perfect womanhood.

What she had to tell the world was simple and easily understood.

Chapter X

Aaron was speechless. His heart stood still for a moment, and he swallowed in agitation.

Had Aphrodite, born in the froth of towering waves, risen from the depths of ocean with a skin of gold and ivory—come to life, come to this enchanted island with all her perfect youth, to turn him to stone with her supernatural, almost illusory beauty? Was she human at all? Was *he* human? Or were they both figures hewn by some fanciful sculptor, set down as an offering to his inspiring deity on this world-forsaken spot? Or, had God repeated His own work and fashioned her anew from sleeping Adam's rib?

She seemed disappointed. Her eyes and lips betrayed it. He listened to her deep, mellow voice, and his heart began to beat fast and wildly, for she spoke English; broken English; but it sounded like the soft, richly coloured notes of a beautiful flute. There was a melancholy, monotonous lament in her voice, perfectly harmonious, perfectly blended with the whispering solitude of nature and the setting sun, whose last rays now threw a strange light on the lonely man and woman. Aaron's deep brown skin turned to a violent red—the woman's features into richest gold.

"Art thou not my father?" she asked, in a sad, singing tone. "Somna sad—very sad."

Aaron shook his head, not yet able to speak.

"Art thou, great white man, a lost soul?—wandering hungrily and thirstily?"

"No," said Aaron. "No. But what is your name? Who are you?"

"A child, great white man, named Somna. My father was great. His soul has gone to Jehovah. He never returned from eternal life to his poor little Somna and her mother."

"Then you saw me from yonder and thought I was your father? Has he been dead long?"

Somna looked up to the paling sky and said:

"Jehovah, great Almighty God, and Father of Jesus Christ, dwells in Heaven—dost thou not know it?"

Aaron looked away from her great eyes, and after a little pause said:

"Yes, Somna—I suppose I do know it."

"Why dost thou, great white man, look so afraid? Dost thou doubt Somna's words?"

"Indeed I do not," said Aaron, "but if you mean that your father has died, he will not return to this life. Dead people never return."

"Mother says he will return, with God, Father of Jesus Christ."

"I cannot say, my child, if that is so. I do not know God and what He intends to do."

Twilight set in.

Somna stood silent, gazing upon Aaron with wonder, and it seemed that there was pity, a world of mute, sacred love in her eyes.

"Hast thou come here alone?" she inquired.

"I have," answered Aaron, with a sudden start. "But my ship is anchored in the lagoon."

"Hast thou come here on a great ship? Hast not been drowned in the great waves?" Large tears came into her eyes, and she spoke with excitement. "Thou wilt not see Somna's father; he will not see the ship, the wonderful ship for which he has died in longing to behold. . . ."

"*You* will be able to see it," replied Aaron. "But I have missed my way. I shall rest here in the forest, and return on the morrow."

Somna's eyes showed great joy, and she said:

"Great white man, wilt thou not come and take food and drink? Wilt thou not sleep under Somna's roof? Come, before darkness comes to us—come to the house of father mine."

She turned towards the wood whence she had come.

Mute and exhausted Aaron followed. God had sent him

more wonders. Here was an angel, leading him deeper and deeper into the paradise. The good in him cried aloud; his soul found sudden peace in the dimness among the tall pillars of palm-trees. It was to him as if he wandered through the aisle of a great sacred cathedral.

Somna's wonderful figure shone through her transparent cotton veil. The weight of her black hair held her face upward. Aaron followed her with a drooping head and listened to her soft footsteps, believing that they would lead him on to Heaven. Would he not gladly walk like this until his last day, then finally fall on his knees to whisper a prayer and give up his soul to God?

But their journey came to an end, just as darkness set in. They stopped at a small hut, a primitive cottage with a thatched roof. The ridge-pole was barely twelve feet from the ground, held by snow-white rafters stripped of their bark.

Somna drew aside a curtain of matting and spoke in her melodious voice to some one within, but now she used a language which Aaron did not understand. For some time there was no answer. Then there came the sound of a dry, piercing cough, and a feeble, tired voice spoke a few words.

They entered.

First Aaron saw two large, mournful eyes fixed upon him. Then a woman, very tall, thin, with a wrinkled face, rose from a low couch of matting and stepped towards him. She bent her head, as if to kiss him, but only rubbed her broad intelligent nose gently on his. Then she turned aside and said in English—very badly pronounced:

"Great white man, thou art not husband mine, but thou welcome. Somna, thou wilt take care of mista."

Somna fetched a low, rough chair, and said:

"Wilt thou rest in chair of father? Wilt thou take food and drink?"

For the first time Aaron smiled.

Both mother and daughter looked at him in astonishment. A smile seemed unknown to them—who had forgotten how to smile, whose hearts were awaiting the return of a soul, whose lives were given up to God.

Aaron seated himself and said:

"I must thank you both for your kind hospitality. Indeed, I have never felt so much at home in my life as I do now."

The mother also sat down. A dry cough rang out from her chest again. Somna went to fetch food and drink. Aaron watched her opening a stone jar in which bread-fruit was conserved. A little light, fed by palm-oil, flickered in the eddies of air flowing through the beams under the roof. It lighted up a square of cardboard with illuminated letters which hung on the wall. Aaron read:

"There is no one good but one, that is God."

In a corner there was a wooden crucifix, and a small monstrance glittered over the door. Under the crucifix was a rough bedstead, rising an inch or two above the ground, and next to it stood a locked cabin trunk.

Somna offered Aaron a large slice of bread-fruit, which he ate at once. It tasted floury and wholesome. Then he had an orange, and after that a bowl of fresh cocoa-nut milk, which he drained to the bottom.

Mother and daughter watched him.

Aaron began to feel embarrassed, and spoke:

"How is it, my dear ladies, that you speak English so well?"

His voice sounded timid.

"Somna," said the mother, "Somna speak well the great tongue of white people—poor Sabeth not speak well."

She looked at Somna, who was seated on the cabin trunk, resting her chin on her hand.

"I almost forgotten all," said Somna in a soft, singing voice. "When I was child, better spake. But Somna can read—great white man must pardon."

"You read?" said Aaron. "Do you read any books?"

"We read Holy Bible every day. Great words of Jehovah, Father of Jesus Christ."

"But," said Aaron, "who has taught you the tongue of the white man, my good child? Are there white men living on this island?"

"No, thou art only white man on island," replied Somna. "Father died more than two thousand sunsets ago. He spake white tongue. He build house here for us."

Mother Sabeth wiped tears from her eyes. Then she beckoned Somna to come to her. Somna put her arm around her and gently helped her to lie down on the couch.

"Mother Sabeth ill," she said to Aaron, with a look of lonely sorrow. "Mother Sabeth sleep now."

"Perhaps you, my child, also wish to retire. I will find a place outside where I can rest. It is a consolation to me to know that human beings are near me."

Mother Sabeth closed her eyes and Somna said, standing by the sick woman like a protecting angel:

"Not go out under trees—this roof protect thee."

She pointed towards her bed.

"Rest thine head on Somna's bed. Somna will sleep elsewhere."

Aaron looked at her with eyes of such wonder that she thought he intended to spring up and leave her.

"No, no," she said again. "Stay here, not sleep under trees."

She bent towards her mother for a moment, then quickly turned back to Aaron and said:

"Wilt thou pray with me?"

A deep blush appeared under Aaron's tawny skin. He did not answer.

Somna knelt down by Mother Sabeth and said the Lord's Prayer. Aaron listened. A strange force overpowered him. He clasped his hands together, knelt on the ground, and pressed his brows down so that they almost touched his cheeks. With Somna he prayed, "Forgive us our sins"—not knowing to whom he prayed.

There was a God somewhere—no doubt He would hear. Was it the same God whom he had feared on that day? Was it the serpent—the poisonous voice from the darkness of his own heart, and was it the serpent who roused the conflict within him? Was it the serpent who led him? . . . He listened.

"For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. . . ."

Somna made the sign of the cross.

Aaron had prayed for the first time since his boyhood,

prayed fervently, heartily, to his unknown God. A fresh wind entered his heart. He saw Somna still kneeling, her loins still bent in silent prostration before God, and he wished, craved to be without sin himself, to be as pure as she was.

Mother Sabeth had closed her eyes. Somna rose. There was no change in the dark shine of her eyes when she seated herself opposite to Aaron and said in a whisper :

"Great white man, I thank thee for praying with me."

"Why did you pray in English?" inquired Aaron, looking aside, dazzled by her beauty.

"I speak to white man now quietly," she said, "Mother Sabeth asleep. Father mine taught me great English prayer when I was little child."

"Then, tell me—was your father an Englishman?" inquired Aaron, becoming intensely curious. She nodded impulsively and said :

"Yes, he was great apostle of Jesus Christ."

"A missionary?"

"Yes, missionary, preaching under the trees, words of Jehovah."

"I see," said Aaron, folding his hands between his knees and gnawing his lips. "Was he a missionary on this island?"

"No," replied Somna, "in Tahiti. I was only little girl when father mine left Tahiti. But I remember all."

"Then tell me why your father left Tahiti."

"I cannot tell thee. Father mine left Tahiti with tears. Other great white men looked very cross."

"But did he intend to come to this island?"

"I will tell story to thee. But thou must forgive—memory not always true. Father, Mother Sabeth and little child Somna went on great ship. Fourteen sunsets passed and great wind arrived. Ship was killed. Father and mother took me in small ship and landed on great rocks. Here on this island where thou art on now, but far away—more than feet can walk in one day. Father mine made this house, and lived here more than a hundred sunsets. He often go on mountain and look on great sea. He often had tears in eyes, and cried to Mother Sabeth. He was waiting for great white man's ship to come and take us away all. But ship never

come, and father mine died. Mother Sabeth is ill—she has great sickness in heart and soul, and will die also, and Somna will die also and we both will go to see father mine in almighty heaven. When I saw white man to-day I believed beholding father mine. It is not so. Thou art a stranger—but, stranger, welcome, much, much welcome.”

“Thank you, Somna,” replied Aaron. “Is there anything I can do for you? Can I be of any help?”

“No, no,” she replied. “God helps all His children. God guide Somna always.”

“I have come to this island to buy it,” said Aaron.

Somna looked blank; she did not understand the meaning of his words.

Aaron explained.

“This island belongs to the French Government.”

But Somna evidently could not grasp his meaning. She only replied:

“All world, water and wind belongs to God. I cannot understand thy speech.”

“Let me tell you in a simple way, my child. God has made all the world, the water and the wind. He has also made us. You—and me.”

Somna looked on the ground. Her eyes shone black.

“But there is a great world of white people far away from this island,” Aaron continued, “people who rule the whole world. To them belongs this island, too.”

He felt that she could not understand how the island could belong to anybody outside of it. So he tried to explain:

“White men can come to this island and take possession of it, live on it and take away anything they wish to take.”

“White man welcome,” said Somna, “very welcome. White man take away what his heart wishes. Live thou here, if thou please so, sleep thou on my bed. Somna sleep there.”

She pointed towards the corner where Aaron sat.

“I remember white men in Tahiti,” she went on. “With fire and sword, and a great house built for Jehovah. Somna memory sad.” She looked aside for a moment, and then added, “Somna is tired.”

“Well, you must go to sleep, my child,” said Aaron. “I

will certainly not take your bed. White men never accept such kindness from a woman. I will sleep here, or outside, if you will allow me to do so."

"Thou art generous," replied Somna. "Thou must be good and near to God."

She rose, went to her bed and lay down to rest. She covered her body with thin matting. Her eyelids closed. Their long lashes shaded her cheeks, to which came a rosy freshness. Her breasts heaved gently, and she slept.

Aaron was alone. He went outside, flung himself on the warm, dry moss and with his face turned towards the stars gazed into the vast universe.

Somna had called him generous because he had refused to rest on her bed. She had told him that he was good and near to God. . . . Was he? There, among the stars, lived a God whom humanity sought and worshipped. As the stars surrounded the world, so God invisibly embraced humanity. Suddenly Aaron found himself to be a believer. Faith came to him in the dark, warm night, on a lonely stray path in his life. He believed in some unknown symbol, and was aware of its all-pervading presence. The serpent nested in his heart of sin and slept among the evil; but at that moment the good was awake and triumphed. Yet it required more than human strength to drive out the snake; a wonder was needed. If God had only shown His hand, Aaron might have become a new man. But He did not do so. Perhaps He deemed it wiser to let Aaron fight his own battle.

Awed, overwhelmed by the novelty of his feelings, Aaron became utterly confused, until he hardly knew what was good and what was evil.

* * * * *

At dawn Somna awoke. She kneeled at the side of her mother's couch and prayed.

"Great stranger gone?" inquired Mother Sabeth.

"White man gone during Somna's sleep," she replied sadly, and looked anxiously at her mother, who now sat up with a sigh, and with her bony hand rubbed moisture from her eyes.

Somna took a vessel fashioned from the shell of a cocoa-nut and filled it with water from a calabash bowl. She rubbed

a dry herb to powder between her broad palms, and mixed it with the water. It smelled strongly medicinal. Then she held the vessel to her mother's lips, who drank from it eagerly. It seemed to calm her. She breathed more easily, and the heaving of her chest, which was but skin and bone, subsided. After a pause, she said:

"Somna, go thou to-day to Tunga. Thou must. Thou hast not been there thirty sunsets."

"I cannot leave thee, mother," replied Somna.

"Thou must," insisted Mother Sabeth. "Much to be done in Tunga. Jesus Christ wilt thou to go. Mother Sabeth not die. Mother Sabeth safe with Jehovah."

Somna said a prayer. Then she prepared some food for her mother—more than she could eat in one day. Finally she placed a calabash of fresh water, a bowl of cocoa-nut milk and some oranges on a stool near the sick woman, and said softly:

"Somna will go over mountain to Tunga."

Then she left the hut.

The brilliant morning welcomed her. The sun was just rising over the mountain and kissed her lovable brow. She took a large wooden comb and passed it several times through her long hair; then she twisted the long black coil with her fingers and knotted it firmly at the back of her head. She passed her slender finger-tips over her eyes towards her ears, continuing this movement slowly, opening her arms until they spread out like the wings of an eagle. That was Somna's morning toilet; sufficient, with her daily bath, the regularity of her life, and sleep undisturbed by fantastic dreams, to keep her in the most perfect health.

The sunbeams also kissed Aaron's rough features.

Somna had already seen him asleep not far off under a myrtle tree.

His face seemed stern and set. He appeared shorter and broader lying on the moss than he would have done standing up. His thick flannel shirt was flung open, exposing a shaggy Achillean chest.

Suddenly he awoke, sprang to his feet, and stretched his body with such force that his bones almost cracked at their

joints. When he saw Somna's quiet eyes fixed on him he came close to her.

"Good morning, Somna. . . . How wonderfully I have slept!"

"Somna was afraid thou hadst gone to great ship in the darkness. But happy now because white man has not gone."

"Why happy?"

"If white man would have gone without farewell, Somna would be sad and believe white man cross."

Aaron smiled. Somna looked astonished.

"Oh, no," he said, "I should certainly not go away without thanking you and your dear mother for everything. In fact, I have been thinking that I must do something for you. I have things on my ship which would be very useful to you."

"I thank thee," she replied. "Thou art generous, and near to God; but we want nothing."

Aaron was confused for a moment; then, carried away by an impulse, he said, "Somna, you are a wonderful woman—such another is not to be found."

Her eyes indicated sorrow and pain.

"Thou must not speak about me. Thou must be silent," she said. "I am nothing—I am dust. I am small servant of Jesus Christ."

Aaron took her hand and pressed it. She willingly let him do so, thinking that this was the custom of the great white world. She had noticed his astonishment when her mother had rubbed her nose on his, and quickly understood that he was not used to that kind of greeting.

"Tell me," he said, looking towards the mountain, "is there a path that leads across there? I want to go there to-day."

Somna nodded.

"I want to see the whole island before I return," Aaron added.

"Tunga over the mount," she said, taking her hand out of his and pointing to the north. "I go to Tunga to-day."

"What?" said Aaron. "You go there alone?"

"No, God come with Somna. I must go; much, much to be done there."

"What is Tunga?" inquired Aaron.

"Tunga is where house of poor people stand. Very sick—far away from God."

"What—natives?"

"Thou sayest it."

There was a long silence. Then Aaron spoke again.

"I do not know what to say. I do not know if you will allow me—well—I was going over the mountain, and you are going, too. Would you perhaps permit me to come with you to Tunga?"

Somna turned her head aside and looked dark and sad.

"Great white man is generous and near to God. But Tunga very dark and evil."

"Are you afraid to take me there?"

She seemed inwardly agitated and answered:

"Jehovah listened to humble prayer of Somna. Art thou great white man I have prayed for? Thou must be. . . . We go, thou and I, to Tunga."

They set out towards the mountain, following a natural path that wound along under large groves of bread-fruit trees. The scenery was wild. They soon arrived at a lake, bordered by a low, flat tract of land. At the northern extremity of the beautiful deep green water was a narrow channel, which was evidently the source of the stream. The mountain towered up behind the lake, and its summit had the shape of a huge obelisk. The western shore was thickly wooded with cocoa-nut, waving its elegant satin fans; and casuarina, whose boughs hung in arches over the water.

Somna's steps were relentless. She seemed to sway along, hardly touching the ground with her slender feet. Her breath was light in spite of the fierce sun and moist air. Aaron, who toiled and laboured up the hill, was bathed in perspiration, but he never suggested a halt. Her coolness surrounded his spirit and drove him on. He admired everything he saw, including Somna.

Past mid-day they arrived high up on the mountain that stood bold and naked above the Pacific. There was a pass under the great obelisk where the rocks were split up, and here the wanderers rested for a while.

Somna went to a tree and picked a large yellow bread-fruit,

baking hot from the fierce sun. She broke it and offered a piece to Aaron, who sat with his back against a rock, gazing awe-stricken over the island spread out at his feet. The Pacific was blue, deep and rich; towards the horizon it turned darker, almost to an inky black, and cut off the light blue of the sky as far as human eye could see. Long, solemn waves rolled along and burst viciously against the coralline walls. The uproar to their smashing rhythm and the wild dance of towering clouds of white foam could almost be heard. /

The trades blew, drying the moisture on Aaron's skin, and gently touching the eddies of forests creeping out from the base of the mountain towards the lagoon. All nature seemed to be stroked by an invisible hand.

Towards the south whence Aaron had come was an impenetrable forest, which belted the mountain all round to the east, running out as far as the lagoon in many places. To the north, the mountain extended and hid the island from view. Aaron breathed in the strong odour of vanilla blossoms. In his hand he held the piece of bread-fruit, but he never thought of eating it.

"If I die, I wish to die here," he thought. He could hardly call it "die." It would be a passing of the soul from one wonder to another. Could man have any other passion here but to gratify his eyes, to soak in all this beauty, and fill himself with it as if it were a noble vintage that sets the blood coursing?

"Art thou not hungry?" inquired Somna. "Wilt thou not eat?"

"I can't," said Aaron. "This wonderful land takes away my appetite."

"It is all of God, also food and drink. Why dost thou wonder? Is not great white world more wonderful?"

"I assure you it is not. The great white world is nothing like that."

"But He who made the world, has He not made the world all like that?" she inquired, using his last words.

"No, Somna. If that were so, why should I be a white man, and you—well—you are nearly as white as I am."

"God, His will makes all."

"That is so, I suppose. But why has He made all so good, so grand here, and so many things bad elsewhere?"

"Dost thou understand His will, great white man? Good here—evil here—everywhere. Thou wilt see. Jehovah send Jesus Christ to show world goodness."

"Who taught you all this about God or Jesus, Somna?" he asked. "When your father died, you were a mere baby, weren't you?"

"Great book," she said. "And Mother Sabeth."

"Yes, but how is it that you believe in the God of Christ?"

Somna held out her arm and moved a finger.

"Thou canst see life in this finger," she said. "Thou canst see gift of God. Life goes, finger move no longer, finger dead. Dost thou understand?"

"I do," replied Aaron.

There was silence after the last words, which seemed to cut off any further questions. Somna's eyes rested on Aaron with serene tranquillity. He stared into the blue. The lagoon was before his eyes, the wide channel which linked the silent lake to the merry ocean. He suddenly thought of his schooner and looked about for it. Somna followed the direction of his eyes and held up her beautiful arm with the grace which is naturally coupled with beauty.

"There is the great ship of white man," she said.

Her lips were a little apart; her dark eyes filled with tears.

"Great ship at last," she said, with such a deep voice that Aaron was forced to look at her. "Great ship which father expected—great ship at last!"

Just for one moment Aaron thought of his wife, but the deep sorrow which rang out in Somna's voice fixed his attention entirely upon her.

"Somna," he said, "if you wish me to take you away from here I shall do so—with your mother, if you wish, of course."

"Great white man," she replied, "thou must forgive weakness in woman's heart and tears. Thou art generous, but Somna not go away. Mother Sabeth not go away. We are near to God here as elsewhere. Somna and Mother Sabeth remain."

A white cloud, driven along by the trades, enveloped the

obelisk. There was no other cloud anywhere, and it seemed odd that it should have chosen the needle to poise on. Aaron looked up at it. It seemed to him just as odd as the mayfly which flings itself into a cobweb, just as odd as he had been when he flung himself on to this island. He felt secretly ashamed of having offered to take Somna away from her home. It was an offer distinctly evil. Purity was not a treasure of gold and pearls. How dare he take it away and mix it with mud? He was afraid lest she should see his regret and said:

"You will forgive me for offering you that—will you not? I thought——" He became confused under her innocent look. "I mean," he continued, "I had no intention to take you away from this place where you are so happy."

"Thou speak as true friend," said Somna, "thou are great—greater than me. Eat thou the fruit now and follow me."

Aaron made a hasty meal and they went on.

There was no sound in the wilderness through which they went; nothing stirred. The sun scorched the backs of the travellers. Somna shielded herself from its fierce glare with a piece of fine matting. Aaron suffered, but kept up with her pace. At last the dark green ocean came in sight on the northern shore of the island. The mountain side was overgrown with tree-ferns, and the sweet odour of vanilla became more intense.

Somna stood still for a moment and, pointing towards the northern edge of the mountain slopes, she said:

"Tunga—thou behold it. Poor Tunga!"

Chapter XI

Aaron could see an irregular native village and tiny black figures moving about like ants. On the sea beyond the reef were two canoes, with fishermen who had ventured out on the ocean in pursuit of their calling.

The wanderers went on, descending rapidly upon Tunga.

Aaron was aware that he had now crossed the island from south to north.

"Tell me something about Tunga," he begged Somna.

"Thou wilt see," she replied.

"I know, Somna," he said, "but I wish you to tell me if these natives have always lived here."

She shook her head and replied:

"No. Father and mother and Somna were only people on island when thrown on rock by God. One day father saw large canoe. Many souls of darkness in it were thrown on walls of corals. Dark men and women and little children from Raiatea, far off. All come and land and live here. Poor people of evil, not know Jehovah. Marva-rao¹ king was. But he not live long. He dead of evil sickness. Marva-rao, son of him, now king. He only boy then, but man now and listens to voice of poor Somna, but not believe in Jehovah."

"But why did they all come here?" asked Aaron.

"Great plague of God was in Raiatea, all come here to find new place—escape God. But God everywhere, and plague come with poor souls of darkness."

"How many of these natives are alive now?"

"Fifty, but fifty died and fifty eaten by sharks in great waters."

"Good Lord, how awful!" exclaimed Aaron.

"Thou must not be cross, great white man," said Somna. "Souls live in darkness, and do not understand Holy Bible, not desire Jehovah; and Somna cannot teach Holy Bible like father missionary."

"And the young king," said Aaron, "does he do nothing to make things better?"

"Marva-rao child of evil, but soft in heart. Often come over mountain visit Somna and Mother Sabeth. Always promise, often cry; but always forget his promises."

"Is Marva-rao afflicted with disease?" inquired Aaron, with a look of anxiety.

Somna gazed into his eyes for a moment and replied:

"Not know."

Aaron was silent. He had called Somna a child; now he became aware that she was a woman, that she lived in a world

¹ Twilight.

of her own, and he felt an impulse to help her in her mission, to offer his intellect and knowledge which had been lying idle in his life.

They drew near to the village.

At a distance two olive-coloured boys rolled on the ground, biting and hitting each other in the course of a fierce quarrel. Somna hastened to part them. The boys looked upon her with awe, and when they saw Aaron, turned and ran fast to a hut not far off, crying with piteous voices, "Tata-hita, Tata-hita." This meant "Dawn of the Day," and was the name given to Somna by the natives. The half-caste young woman was revered by the people of Tunga. She spoke their language, and whenever she came into their midst they thought a goddess had descended to cure them of their many ills. Her heart went out to their souls given up to imbecile idols, and she roused a strange sympathy among them.

The two boys ran on, crying "Tata-hita!" and from all the huts issued olive and bronze-coloured humanity of all sizes and ages, numbering from forty to fifty. They were barely clad, the young quite naked, and as wild as monkeys. Intense anxiety and curiosity were written on their faces, and their eyes all centred on the white man. Had Aaron been alone he would certainly have felt uncomfortably unsafe in their midst, but in Somna's presence he had no fear; indeed, he felt nothing but deep interest in all he saw.

A female of indefinable age, fat and hideous, waddled towards Somna. The shape of her immense body was indescribable. There seemed no likeness in it to anything human. A shark was tattooed horizontally across her enormous chest and back. No doubt the ornamentation had been branded on her body when she was young and, perhaps, handsome. But now the design was stretched by the fabulous growth of massive fat, and accentuated her hideousness. Her skin had a dull shine like the epidermis of a boa; her neck and head had grown into one solid mass. A distorted mind gleamed through her narrow eye-slits. She was thought to possess the spirit of Oro, and she ruled the village like a fanatic, a sorceress, dominating even Marvo-rao, the young king or chief. She had been the wife of different chiefs in turn,

and if she had not killed her offspring they would have numbered over a dozen. As it happened, only one of them, a babe with a skin almost as white as that of a European, had survived the savage rite of the Areoi¹ society. But when the babe had grown into a small boy he had died of a Western disease, which had plagued his little body from birth.

Aaron thought of a rhinoceros when this woman came close up to Somna and spoke fierce words to her in native language. Somna answered quietly. The eyes of the villagers went from her to Aaron in quick, inquisitive succession. Tenania—this was the name of the Colossus—spoke in a quarrelsome voice, which sounded coarse and dry. The villagers murmured. Somna spoke again, and all eyes rested definitely on Aaron. He looked calm and benevolent. There seemed to be no hostility towards him among the natives. Tenania, however, gazed on him with poisonous hatred. The natives murmured louder than before, then suddenly made way for Marva-rao, their king.

He was a young man, about three-and-twenty, six foot four inches in height, with a broad forehead; and the expression of a hardened cynic marked his features. Perfect manhood was expressed in his large, well-formed limbs and their light actions. He wore a waist-cloth, and a most singular head-dress.

It was a kind of wig, consisting of long coloured beards, fastened to a net-work fitted on to his head. Whether they were the beards of vanquished enemies, taken as trophies by his ancestors, or woman's hair curled in thick lumps and dyed, Aaron could not be sure. Several small whales' teeth, the roots of which were fixed to the net-work, protruded through the hair like short horns. One was placed over each eye, one over each ear.

Marva-rao was naked, except for his waist-cloth, but his nakedness seemed decent, for his body was one vast picture: a masterpiece of tattooing. His back was covered with arbitrary figures: stars and circles gracefully and neatly drawn. His muscular legs were ornamented with designs of cocoa-nut trees, the roots of which spread at his heels; the elastic

¹ A society of pagan fanatics, now extinct.

stalks wound round his ankles; the waving plumes unfurled themselves over his shins and calves. On his knees were two more cocoa-nut plantations. The stems of the trees were twined up his thighs, and the tree tops were liberally diffused over his abdomen and hips in a most curious way. But it was certainly an effective work of strange art. His wide chest was covered with double stripes, which radiated from the solar plexus and wound along the ribs, finally flowing into the stars and circles on his back. But the best part of the work was on his arms, which were covered with counterfeit palm-leaves, the tips of which spread over his hands and fingers to their very ends.

No doubt Marva-rao was a noble.

He stood still some yards in front of Aaron, his spear, quite eighteen feet long, pointed skyward. He might have inspired any warrior, or even Aaron, with terror, but for the total lack of warlike spirit in his tattooed features, which were nothing but a lazy play of cynical expressions, tragicomic rather than intellectual. He was a worn-out, anæmic giant, and seemed to say: "I am the offspring of a bygone glory. This spear would not kill a rat. This get-up is all humbug. I live here with only four wives. My people are all sick. I am just waiting until they are all dead, and then I shall die also. Why was I not born a girl babe, to be killed before I had tasted the milk of the mother who bore me? My arms are strong, but I never swing the *omore* or the *pæho*.¹ I am here, waiting for my brain to turn soft from the sins of the great father and king, Marva-rao, who died of the great plague imported by the white men."

In the circle behind him appeared three of his wives. The fourth was lying-in with a child, a girl; and there was but herself to suckle her. A princess suckled by one woman! whereas the king himself had had four nurses, who had killed their own offspring to bring him up.

The three wives were no doubt the most shapely of all the women present, especially one, who had almost delicate lines. They suffered more or less, however, from various diseases.

¹ Clubs—one having sharks' teeth.

The eldest had elephantiasis in one of her arms, which was swollen to the size of a bread-fruit.

When Aaron saw this complaint, his eyes were opened. The dark skins of the natives no longer hid from view the dreadful affliction of disease of all kinds. Even the small boys whom he had heard shrieking a little while before were infected by it.

Civilisation had penetrated even to this remote island, and transformed with its diseases a paradise into a hell of mortal suffering. And Somna had said that Christ, the Christ of the white people, wished her to go to Tunga. Could she imitate His wonders and heal by laying hands upon their sinful heads? Could faith ever enter their minds at all? Somna touched nobody. Did her pure hands shrink from contact with these ill-fated savages?

Her voice, her eyes, and her simple speech, however, touched them all. The ring of savages opened and Somna, with Aaron at her side, walked through their silent midst. They walked on and on, followed in silence by the native crowd, until they came to the hut of Marva-rao, the chief. Only Tenania, the demented witch, was recalcitrant. To her Somna's words were poison. Words of the great God and His Son brought a savage growl from her mouth, and her fat hands balled tightly. She waddled behind the crowd, and wild, uncanny glances shot from her eye-slits.

Whilst Somna bade the natives stand around her, Tenania slyly entered the hut, where a woman was lying on the floor of matting staring up into the cocoa-nut beams under the thatched roof. She had a small babe in her arms. Its little limbs struggled in the air, and from its tiny mouth came a whimsical whine for milk and life.

Whilst Somna's deep, sonorous voice hailed Jehovah and Jesus, and besought them to come down and spread their heaven of love among the people, Tenania took a cudgel in her hand with which to kill the new-born babe. The mother cried out, thinking her own hour had struck. Somna heard her, and hurried forward.

She entered the chief's hut. Tenania's wild, crude voice was heard shouting. A fight ensued. The cudgel hit the

air. Somna seized it. She wrestled with the savage, took the cudgel from her and threatened her with it. Tenania came out of the hut, and waddled off in the direction of the sea, uttering fearful words, foaming in wild frenzy.

Somna's eyes flared. Her holy anger, her Titian strength impressed every one, except Marva-rao, the father of the babe, who stood still, smiling unconcernedly.

"What is the matter, after all," he probably thought; "what would have been more natural than to kill a babe? Tenania rules—she has the spirit of Oro in her—she is a goddess."

Somna threw the cudgel on the ground. She spoke fervently, and finally prayed to Jehovah.

At last Marva-rao made a sign. The natives dispersed.

Then he spoke to Somna in a meek voice, and they entered the hut. Aaron was the chief guest, and Somna interpreted for him many of the chief's words, such as:

¹ "Great white man, I behold thee as friend."

"Great white man, sons of other great white men Marva-rao beheld in his early youth—many of them."

"Great white man, believer in great white God of powder and fire."

Marva-rao offered food and drink, but Somna refused it. Aaron followed her example. He now had time to observe minutely the beautiful designs on the chief's body. His skin, on a nearer view, was seen to be unsound, broken and sore.

Aaron pitied him, and at the same time felt disgust. "How can Somna go among such people?" he thought, and his admiration for her became intensified tenfold. Amid the beauty of nature her purity had seemed a natural gift of God. But here it shone like a rare jewel, a great light in the darkness.

Somna was now speaking to the wives of the chief, and Aaron could hear the latter howling and sobbing.

Seated with Marva-rao alone for the time being, he remembered that he had cigarettes in his pocket. He offered one to the chief, and lighted one for himself. There came a cry of terror from every corner when he struck a match. Even

¹In order to give a true impression of the conversation of the natives, it has been necessary to render their speech in broken, and sometimes bad, English.

the woman with the babe forgot her own misery for a moment.

Somna gazed upon Aaron. He smoked his cigarette quietly, picked up the one that Marva-rao had dropped in his terror and tried by gestures to induce the chief to imitate him. Marva-rao, however, refused to smoke. Aaron smiled at the chief, and presented him with the empty match-box, which the savage took with awkward nervousness. Turning away from the sobbing wives of Marva-rao, Somna said to Aaron:

"Great white man, I will go and see poor woman in other house not far away; wilt thou wait?"

"I will wait for you," replied Aaron, and he saw her leave with two of the chief's wives.

When she had left him, Aaron was overcome by a strange loneliness. A cold shudder ran through him when he saw the suckling lying on her bare back, kicking her thin legs in the air. She cried, but there was no hand to lift her to the breast of her mother, who lay staring vaguely, tossing her head from left to right, and pulling herself up in order to cast a glance at the white stranger. Marva-rao sat silent as a statue. His lips, forming a fleshy bulwark in his cynical countenance, were bulged up, their corners forcibly drawn down. He gazed upon the white man with a dumb, almost idiotic expression, like an ox, and never attempted to speak. There was not even a spark of savagery in his magnificent frame to disperse that frightful sterility. He would just eat, sleep, and breathe the air as long as there was life in him.

There were only eight men living in the village besides himself, two of them veteran fishermen. The natives formed one large family, without father, mother, aunt or grandmother; all going towards their doom, yet they all believed their spirits would go to the great house of Oro, where everything was pure and magnificent, where their forefathers had gone before them. On that day there was a silent animation going through Tunga like a refreshing draught through a narrow, heated room. There was a stir in all the dark souls, very faint, but definite.

Invisible arms seemed lifted up to Heaven from this forcing-

pit of disease—to catch, perhaps, the air, the purity of the sweet odour that followed Somna wherever she went.

She would go into a miserable hut where a woman shared her husband with others of her sex. She would kneel beside her couch, as she had done at Mother Sabeth's bedside, and speak of God and His Son, and of salvation. She would go to the door and gently call to a loafing boy and ask him to sweep out the dirt from the sick house, or send him on a secret errand to a woman's friend. She would speak with such kindness and sadness that the boy would fall on his knees and rub his nose on the spot where her feet had trodden.

Women would come and cry and give her the most amazing accounts of their lives, until Somna had to close her eyes, while tears of misery ran down her cheeks.

When she visited the men her voice was firm, her brow commanding. She attacked them in their innermost being, scolded them for their lazy, immoral ways. Some of them wrapped themselves in brooding silence; others said:

"Give us remedies, Tata-hita, and we will follow you to the mouth of the shark"; or, "Take away Marva-rao and Tenania, the strongest of us, and we will leave the darkness and come unto you."

Somna prayed. In the middle of the village she prayed to God for Tunga and its people, for the white man, for the world. She found strength in her belief, and at last she returned to the house of the chief.

Aaron was still seated in the same position. After picking up the naked babe from the floor and placing it at its mother's side, Somna seated herself next to him and said:

"Wilt thou forgive me, great white man? Somna talk to Marva-rao."

Aaron nodded assent. Somna's presence relieved him, made him happy. He had begun to feel helpless and hopeless, like a child waiting for its mother's return. The tattooed savage overwhelmed him with his mournful silence; by degrees his body had seemed to take the shape of a morbid monster, so unnaturally large and sinister had it appeared in the dimness of the hut.

Somna now began an animated discussion with Marva-rao.

At first he listened to her. Then he began to answer with abrupt, hasty words which roused an indignant look in her peaceful, dark eyes. Her head was bent forward quite angrily and her voice trembled. Then she began to mention names. She looked at the mother and babe in the corner, and her voice became supplicating.

The soul of Marva-rao seemed to awake at moments, and his dull eyes to be lit up by her influence. Then for a brief second a spark entered into the barren giant and utterly transformed him. This encouraged Somna and made her more persevering. Her mind lived in a temple of wisdom and charity; the words which she spoke were holy; they gripped Aaron's heart, although he could not understand them. To him it seemed but yesterday that he was a little boy, sitting on his mother's lap, looking through an illustrated Scripture book. He saw once more the Lord walking with Abraham to Sodom and Gomorrah, marketing for souls. He saw Isaac on the altar and the ram's face looking out from a bush; Moses as a babe in the bulrushes; Joseph and Pharoah; David; the Prophets; Christ and His disciples; the thousand pictures of His life, His suffering, His death and resurrection; the great St. Paul and the wonderful Promised Land of the Revelations; pictures and words that had changed the heart of the world, that had laid new foundations. All this he had in common with Somna. It was her divine spirit which had recalled it to him. For years he had travelled about the world; he had eaten and slept; he had married; he had forgotten. For years all his innermost self had been painted over with the flimsy whitewash of civilisation. But now it dropped from him.

Somna was an able advocate of Christ. Marva-rao had tears in his eyes, which increased and rolled freely down his face. He sobbed like a child, but Somna's words continued to fall on him like blows of a sledge-hammer on an anvil. The wives who were present again began to sob aloud, and for a while Somna said nothing. She closed her eyes and, clasping her palms together, prayed silently. Then she rose up to her full height and said a loud prayer. She spoke

words which acted like balm on the stupid hearts of the savages.

Then she looked at Aaron and said:

"Late is hour. Wilt thou come with Somna to Mother Sabeth?"

Together they left the house of the chief. From afar off the villagers stood gazing after them. There was an air of peace resting over the village. Somna's spirit hovered about the humble huts long after she had left them. The men sat staring vaguely before them; the women, huddled together in small crowds, talked in whispers. Only Tenania waddled out into the village road, shouting curses at the white God, at Somna, and the stranger.

"May the great shark eat the white God. . . . May Oro strike the white man with the sickness the white God has brought to us!"

But that night Tenania had no followers. She became mad with fury, ran into the forest and there was stricken with a terrible seizure which, after two hours, prostrated her under a bread-fruit tree in a state of utter exhaustion.

Chapter XII

The sun set before Somna and Aaron reached the pass on the mountain. Night spread over the silent forests and the wilderness of rocks. Great bats flew noiselessly through the warm Pacific air and fluttered about the dark path by which the two wanderers had set out to return to Mother Sabeth.

"Art thou tired, hungry and thirsty?" inquired Somna, after a silence that had lasted two hours. Her voice was as deep and dark as the night surrounding her.

"No, Somna, I am not," said Aaron, "but you must be tired yourself."

"Very tired," she replied, "long way to Mother Sabeth. Wilt thou stay here the night with me?"

"But Mother Sabeth might be very ill——"

"Mother Sabeth in God's hand—enough food and drink she

has for two days. Somna weak, tired woman, and remain here."

She kneeled down to prepare a place where she might rest.

"Poor Somna," said Aaron, "you will be cold here. How can you rest among the stones?"

"Not cold," she answered, lying down; "sleep here before when gone to poor Tunga."

"Do you often go to Tunga?" Aaron asked.

"Twice a month, if I can; but not been a month last time."

They were both silent for a while; then Aaron said:

"I have never in my life seen such misery as I have seen to-day. The Holy Spirit that has led you to these poor savages in order to help them has gone into me somehow. I feel I could do something great for them all. I want to help them."

"Thou art great and generous," said Somna.

So sincere and simple sounded her praise that Aaron blushed. What had he done to deserve to be called great and generous? Somna attributed qualities to him which he did not possess. Was it great, was it generous, to be conquered by a woman infinitely greater, infinitely more generous than he was himself, by a woman who did not know him, but who believed in him—believed that he was near to God? But had she known how the words which she had spoken to Marva-rao had cut into his soul, how they had roused in his heart pity for the stupid, savage idolaters, how her own perfection, her purity had transfigured him, so that he saw God through her innocence and sacred devotion to Christ and His teaching—what would she have said to him?

"What wilt thou do for Tunga, generous white man?" asked Somna, interrupting Aaron's thoughts.

"I think one might begin work of some kind among the natives," he replied. "Their idleness leads to disaster. Then, they ought to be cured of their many diseases if possible, otherwise they will simply die out."

"Thou speakest truthfully, and thinkest deeply. I am much, much happy—but wilt thou stay on island to help?"

"I am afraid," answered Aaron, "I cannot stay now, but surely I can come back."

"God go with thee wherever thou goest. I am much, much thankful for thy counsel. I will make Tunga work. They

shall build house to Jehovah, and Somna will teach Holy Bible."

"That is an admirable plan," said Aaron. "When I return—if I can, of course—I shall find a chapel at Tunga."

"Pray thou with me now," she said. "I am tired."

She said the Lord's Prayer, as she had done the night before, and a little prayer for Tunga, her mother, and the white man.

"Jehovah, wilt thou protect the great white man in his journey to the great world," she ended, and then she went to sleep, resting her head, with its beautiful hair, on her palm.

Aaron gazed up at the stars for an hour. Then he pulled off his coat and gently covered Somna's body with it. He looked at her beautiful features in the dimness of the night for a while, and then walked away some distance, resolved to remain there until she should seek him in the morning.

When the first sunbeams fell on the obelisk and the island emerged from darkness into light, Aaron and Somna stood near the pass on the mountain and looked out over the wide ocean once more.

Aaron felt drunk with air and health, which gave him a feeling of supernatural strength. He felt as if he could have lifted up the island with his arms into heaven, where purity blossoms eternally, where the sores of disease and wounds are healed forever. He could have shouted, laughed, or cried.

Somna had awakened and smiled—the long-forgotten smile—when she found herself covered with Aaron's coat. She had cried out to him in soft, singing tones, and then had found him asleep behind a rock of basalt. Then she had sat close by him, waiting for his eyes to open in the twilight of morning. When he awoke she had smiled once more. Aaron had held his head between his hands, and could not believe. . . . A smile! . . . It set him trembling; it was so strange and wonderful. He knew at once that he would never forget it, just as he would never forget her golden figure bathing in the flare of the evening sun. He would go back to his schooner with Somna living in his heart; he would look upon the world with Somna's eyes, smile Somna's smile. . . .

But Somna looked anxious now. Her sadness had returned with the light of the sun.

"Seest thou the ship?" she said, pointing to the horizon.

Aaron could see his schooner miles away, like a black dot on the water.

He replied, "Yes."

"Seest thou little ship not far from it?" she continued.

He replied, "No."

"Somna see little ship—men in it." She counted with her fingers. "Four men in it—coming to us."

Aaron could see nothing, and marvelled at her eyesight.

"Thou will be wanted by friends," she said. "Anxious hearts seek thee here. Thou must go—go now."

She looked at him, and he was overwhelmed with sadness.

"Thou sad, art thou?" she added, with a sweet inquiry in her voice. "Remember thou, father mine died with longing to behold little ship with great white men. Thou hast fire and smoke, also tobacco. He only had one brown leaf and saved it long, long time, and smoked last leaf before his soul has gone to Jehovah."

"Somna," said Aaron, "I pity your poor father. It must be dreadful to hope, hope, and never, never grasp."

"All hope. Somna hopes, Mother Sabeth hopes. Hope is given by God to believe in God, invisible God. Hope never fulfilled in world, but hope fulfilled in God."

"You have a wonderful faith," said Aaron. "I will also hope, I will hope for a new life—something great."

"Come thou with me now," said Somna. "I will lead thee through forest to friends of great white man."

She hurried on. Her perfect figure, her white cotton poncho, her light steps and easy grace made her appear to Aaron more spiritual than ever.

He hoped! For what? . . .

God had sent Somna to lead him through paradise, lead him through hell, lead him back into his old life. He was but a poor beggar, who had ventured out from his miserable den to seek a palace, to wallow in the illusion of a superior life. A charming caretaker, full of kindness and greatness,

showed him all the wonders of the magnificent residence. She was hospitable, asked him to take with him whatever he might wish to possess. She never suspected the beggar to be a thief; surely she believed him a king in disguise. And so, like a king, he refused to touch a thing. Now she led him out of all the glory and beauty. She asked him to hope, to live on hope, feed on hope, for ever after. And soon he would be with his beggar friends again, and tell them eloquently about a beauty which their eyes had never seen, which their senses could not have grasped if they had seen it.

It was all inevitable. It was his fate to which he returned. There was, however, one treasure he could take away with him. Nobody would ever know about it; he would never show it to anyone. That treasure was God, and the picture of Somna, through whom he had found God. That treasure was hidden away in his soul for ever, a sacred consolation.

They wandered on through the silent woods, the wonderful flowers, all blooming in their wild colours, happy, untouched. They crossed the little stream which gurgled along, its waters flowing to fill the pool where Somna bathed. Iridescent birds chirped about the bushes where they nested and hatched their opal-coloured eggs.

A shot, then another, rang out and echoed through the forest. Aaron's beggar friends had no doubt lost patience. They were coming to fetch him away from the palace of peace, lest he should remain there and forget them. Or were they really anxious for his safety? Supposing he had fallen into the hands of savages and had been killed? Would they have missed him? Perhaps. At any rate, for so long as the murder remained unavenged. No doubt Master Phillips and the crew would have taken many lives to pay for his; with veritable joy they would have fired into the mob of tawny natives whose spears or arrows would have fallen short by many yards.

Civilisation had always forced an entrance by means of superior weapons; by the peaceful missionary with his doctrines; or by powder and shot, always the most appropriate and convincing argument of the great white man.

The short bangs, the representative sounds of civilisation, were repeated. Aaron—so much had he changed—felt that he owed Somna an apology for the behaviour of his crew.

"Forgive those fellows," he said. "They are not killing, only shooting into the air so that I may hear their signal."

"I know," she said. "But sad, very sad memory about great powder and fire. When I was little child, saw six white men from great ship come on land Tahiti and kill one poor white man with fire."

"Were they not punished for doing it?" inquired Aaron.

"No," she replied. "One man commanded fire, and poor man fell dead. Terrible."

"He was probably a criminal," said Aaron thoughtfully, "and deserved his death."

Somna looked at him with melancholy and replied:

"Thou shalt not kill."

Aaron, who had been thinking of the revolver in his pocket, and of firing a shot or two in answer to the others, now left the weapon untouched. At the outset of his lonely wanderings on the island it had been a satisfaction to have a revolver about him; now he thought that even this measure of precaution was suggested by the instinct of murder. It seemed monstrous to carry any weapon at all in the presence of Somna.

But did not all things in nature prey on one another, except the pure and innocent? He would gladly imitate Somna, but he could never be like her. So what was the use of trying to become what he could never be? In the great white world, which she thought so wonderful, there was nothing pure and innocent which was not preyed upon by the soiled and the knowing.

What was the use of Aaron's heart struggling against the return to his former life? His will was free, but his hands were tied to his wife, and to his fate. Every step led him back to them.

Somna's eyes had seen truly: there were four people on the shore, three men and a woman. Aaron and Somna stood still, hidden in the fringe of the forest whence they could see the anxious movements of the search-party, who had found

Aaron's boat beached on the sand. Their own was now lying next to it. The men went hither and thither, calling for Captain West. Then they held a consultation.

Victoria stood upright on the sand, and fierce looks shot from under her eyebrows. She was clad in shrieking colours, and her hands were pressed against her slender hips. No doubt she was ready to receive her straying husband in her own way.

Aaron drew Somna gently aside, lest Victoria should see her through the thick, glossy foliage of the trees.

"She shall not see her," he thought. "Her inquisitive eyes must not perturb Somna's peace of mind, nor must her frivolous voice penetrate to the remoteness of Somna's soul. And Somna must not know that she is my wife. Somna is a woman, a beautiful woman. With all her mockery Victoria could not dispute that. But if they met, Victoria would sneer. Perhaps"—he felt sick at the thought—"she would suspect! Somna is clad only in a white veil, a waist-cloth and sandals."

Aaron breathed hard and excitedly as he said to Somna:

"We must part here. Please remain until I have gone away. We must separate. I may never come back to you again, but think of me, Somna." He was almost in despair. "Somna, pray for me. . . . Good-bye!"

He tore himself away from her, nearly mad with pain, and with quick, drunken steps went towards his wife, who stood rigid, waiting for him. His heart beat fast. His soul, which had been roused elementally, had recognised the goodness and greatness in the world. Now he felt as if it shrank back in bitterness and hid itself in a remote corner of his innermost being. But it was changed. The seed-corn was bound to grow up in it—unless it was trampled under foot. By whom?

Aaron knew that Somna's spirit was following him.

What did it matter if his wife scolded, if all the vials of poisonous fury were emptied over his head? She would never know his secret, because she could never understand it.

Somna's great dark eyes followed the man who tore himself away from her. Through her tears of pain and sorrow she looked up to God and prayed for the soul of the great white man.

THE SECOND JOURNEY

THE SECOND JOURNEY

Chapter XIII

Mrs. West was busy. All her efforts were centred around her personal comforts. To her a nice house meant a great deal: a starting-place for her pleasure haunts, a resting-place when her head became weary and sick from their aftermath.

She had chosen the serene neighbourhood of the Albert Hall because of its central position and the vicinity of the Park; advantages which increased the sensation of comfort felt by the visitor upon entering the Wests' flat.

The rooms were furnished with pompous bright red morocco sofas and arm-chairs, and suggested a life of leisure and pleasure, an existence of lounging and lolling about lazily with feet up on stools or cushions. Spicy books in coloured bindings were always within reach. There were also hidden comforts, such as cigarettes, whisky, port and liqueurs; but so conspicuously were they hidden that the trained "noses" of the vegetators who sponged on the Wests were quite able to find them out without the help of either hostess or butler.

In these surroundings the Wests had now lived for over a year. Many times the carpets had been swept clean of cigarette ash, many times the glasses had been washed, many people had come in and gone out. But with all these comforts at home Mrs. West was away most of her time, either at a West End card club, theatre-going, or dining with friends somewhere or other. She seemed fully to have re-established herself in "society."

She was devilishly *chic*, devilishly attractive. She knew all the knick-knacks, the subtleties, the shops which could make her so. She had changed her powder and the perfume which accompanied her like a wave of attractive odour. If

she were not seen, she was sure to be scented. With her well-preserved freshness she stunned even American women during some of her triumphant sweeps through West End drawing-rooms. She never looked unhappy, always her best. When her head ached and her eyeballs burned biliously, nobody saw her but herself. She thought nothing of giving up, at a moment's notice, a string of late nights, giving up cards, dinners, theatres, everything, in order to fly off to Bournemouth or Scarborough for a couple of weeks of fresh air.

Aaron was no trouble when she had one of these flying fits. He was, so to speak, packed up with the luggage, and he went with her as a matter of course. He never objected to her plans. When she said to him, "To-morrow we are off," he simply answered, "Yes, my dear." If she said, "I shall be late to-night," he said, "Yes, my dear."

He seemed to be just the right kind of husband for Victoria. She had no difficulty in managing him. He always gave in to her, and did just what suited her best. But she seldom asked him to exert himself for her, or attempted to control his movements, or inquired into his business.

Nevertheless, Victoria was aware that her husband had changed since their return to England, and she attributed this to his having had to give up the sea in order to live a quiet life with her. Now she sometimes wished that he would go back to the seas again and leave her behind, free, if only for a month or two. But her finances depended entirely upon him. The allowance he made her had had to be increased time and again, and she had had to exert all her powers of affection to get her dresses, her thousand luxuries. Now and then she had made a definite spurt in her profession of love for him, which Aaron had accepted as a genuine wifely manifestation; and on one occasion he had given her a thousand pounds and thought nothing more than that she needed it and therefore ought to have it.

But Victoria thought, "If he were to go, God only knows how long he might stay away; and I might run short of money in no time. Where could I get four thousand pounds to

spend if he were away?" (She had spent that amount during one year.)

Victoria also had another matter to consider. If for some reason or other she suggested to her husband that he might take a voyage in his schooner, he might become suspicious, might see her in a new light. It would be too silly to risk that. He was an excellent husband while he was blind. Why risk opening his eyes?

Then there was the island. It had been an important subject of their early conversations in London, but now Aaron seldom made any allusion to it. He had heard nothing definite about it; the last letter referring to it was one he had received from his Master Phillips some eight months ago.

* * * * *

In his heart Aaron was conscious of a change. It did not seem to affect his ulterior happiness, but it affected the activity of his mind. In many respects, he was like an animal that lives with a master, is fed, fondled, appreciated, and fully enjoys the pleasures of his species. His mental indifference to anything outside the animal radius seemed appalling.

His very look was enough to indicate a distressing sterility of mind. Who would have thought that that very man had lived, suffered and enjoyed as Aaron had done on the island? The spark of hope that had flickered in his soul when he left the island had been almost crushed out when the point of the great obelisk had sunk into the sea on the horizon. Ever since then his mind had been empty and calm.

Aaron might have been pitied, if there were such a thing as pity for a football that is kicked left and right in all directions, with no will of its own.

Victoria had scored and kicked Aaron into a pompous red morocco arm-chair. There he was, sitting in his London flat, smoking, sipping a drop of whisky before luncheon. He was her captive. It was his own fault, and he did not seem to mind it a bit.

A black November fog brooded over the moist and slippery streets, and the traffic roared alongside the Park, unabating. There was a relentless tearing along. Everything seemed to be impelled by some hurrying purpose. The Albert Hall looked dark and sinister and appeared to rise to an immeasurable altitude.

Mrs. West had gone out in spite of the weather, and Aaron was alone in his room with the whisky. The postman had just called, and a neat-looking maid brought in the letters. There were several for Mrs. West, but only one for Aaron. When he saw the envelope his feet came off the stool as if by instinct, and his figure—looking stouter than it had done a year ago—rose up quite suddenly in the easy-chair.

The envelope was headed: "Consulat Général de France." Aaron opened the letter with haste and read it.

He read it again.

Then he folded it up, put it carefully between the flaps of his pocket-book and relapsed into his former lazy position. He began to gnaw at his forefinger, staring into the fire.

Twice the maid, standing near by, told him that he was wanted on the telephone by Mrs. West. At last he gave a sudden jerk, sprang to his feet and went to answer the call. He was well dressed, in trousers which recalled Mr. Monkton's, and a black braided jacket of the latest cut. He wore a beautiful silk necktie and a pearl pin. His hair and moustache were closely cropped. There was a sprinkle of eau-de-cologne on his handkerchief. His nails were pink and polished. His hips, neck and cheeks were the larger for a thin layer of comfortable fat. But in his movements was the slow, unkempt certainty of the gorilla, which, though quite in accordance with his past life, now grotesquely contradicted the whitewash of London life. He was a second and revised edition of what he had been in Australia.

He took up the receiver and said languidly:

"Hallo, my dear."

"At the *Cecil*—half-past one."

"Yes, my dear."

"In the hall. . . . All right. . . . Good-bye, dear."

He put up the receiver and muttered, "Damn!"

He had just time to keep the appointment, and he went at once.

A page-boy, who awaited him at the *Hotel Cecil*, took his hat and coat and escorted him to Mrs. West.

Aaron, by now perfectly at home in almost every hotel in the West End of London, drew forward a chair. But suddenly he stopped and looked at a youngish man who was sitting by his wife. He knew him. He disliked him. But, of course, he shook hands with him. Then he said:

"How are you, Mr. King?"

Victoria laughed and swept the great hall with a meretricious look.

"Kingy," she said to her husband, "has just told me all about a new stage trick of his. He's going to paralyse the audience at the Tivoli this afternoon."

"Oh," said West. "Let's have it."

"Imposs," replied his wife. "We'll go and see him at the *matinée*."

"Right O, my dear," answered West.

He seemed to be preoccupied, and asked:

"Will Mr. King lunch with us?"

And he was evidently relieved when "Kingy" said:

"I am sorry, old chap, but I've got an appointment here already. Our tables are close together, so if you've got something to tell me you can whisper it."

"I've got a fat lot to whisper to you," thought West, but he said to his wife: "That's quite delightful, isn't it, dear?"

His wife replied, "Yes," and again swept the hall with a look of pompous grace.

"Kingy" rose, shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. West, and crossed the hall to a young and pretty woman who had just entered. He received her with most cordial off-handedness.

"Kingy" had something about him that made people look at him almost against their will. Some women—no doubt ladies—shot glances of disgust after him. But others gazed at him with obvious admiration. A well-known German steel magnate drew up his big feet to let him pass.

Jack King was of the soft and graceful type. He was not tall, but exceedingly well proportioned. His strength was

apparent even from a distance. His face was regular and haughty, his eyes keen and impertinent. His hair was golden, smooth, parted in the middle and well kept. His mouth and his nose were straight. A trace of sarcasm was impressed upon his features, suggesting intellectuality. In reality the whole of his appearance preposterously contradicted his real character. But this shallow charm made for success in his art . . . if it can be called an art. He was an acrobat-comedian, a dare-devil who could walk on a wire, or drink a bottle of stout whilst his body hung upside down, suspended from a bar by the toes of one foot. There was nothing at which Jack King could not beat a chimpanzee into a cocked hat.

From their first meeting Aaron had felt an instinctive loathing for this golden-haired wonder. His deep-set, tropical eyes shot glances like those of a savage animal after him, and he said to his wife:

"I don't know how anybody can make a fuss of that fellow."

"Everyone seems to like him," she replied, with a toss of her head, "and in spite of all that is said about him."

"That shows what damned fools people are. Who's the young woman with him?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied, with a sneer. "Some young music-hall artiste, I suppose. She looks a regular one."

"If that fellow had any guts, he wouldn't show his face in public."

"Why not?" asked Victoria. "His wife must have been a fool, otherwise she wouldn't——"

"A fool!" interrupted Aaron. "Didn't he leave her and his four children? Whose fault was it that she gassed herself and the whole family?"

"She was mad," said Victoria.

"Mad or not mad," said Aaron, "she was left to starve in the slums. If she was mad, that fellow drove her mad. He ought to be spat upon. I, for one, should love to brand his face with a red-hot——"

Victoria laughed aloud.

"Your bark, Aaron, your bark is terrible!" she said.

Again she laughed, a studied, attractive laugh which made people's heads swivel round towards her. She paused and posed.

"I'll come to the *matinée*," Aaron said, submissively. "But I'm going because of Wilkie Bard and Marie Lloyd, not to see that yellow thing."

There was another pause. Then Victoria suggested luncheon.

"Feed, drink, sleep—feed, drink, sleep," thought West, as he followed her.

There was something comic in seeing him walk behind his graceful wife with his grotesque sailor step. At her side he looked more than ever like a well-dressed gorilla.

Victoria ordered luncheon. She would order from no less a person than the *maître d'hôtel* himself. But she drank nothing, lest the flush of wine should pierce the bloom of powder on her cheeks. From time to time she ran her finger gracefully over her eyebrows and lashes; firstly, to make sure that there was no trace of powder there to interfere with the contrast between dark and fair; secondly, to send a blue flash from the full carat brilliant on her middle finger into the eyes of her neighbours. The artificial colour which was rubbed off her lips by the passage of food she replaced with natural colour from time to time, by biting them so that a sudden influx of blood brought back their brightness. Only a full red could show the outline of her mouth at its best.

Aaron mixed whisky and Perrier.

But in the act of drinking he stopped for a moment and fixed his eyes on a person sitting at a table not far off. Then he blushed and busied himself hurriedly with his food, but could hardly eat anything.

Victoria watched him anxiously and fancied that he must have seen some woman whom he had known before he had met her, and that he was embarrassed by this woman's presence. But when, unable to check her curiosity, she investigated for herself, she also blushed. A furious wave of blood rose to her head. For a moment she looked stunned, but immediately set about conquering her emotion.

The cause of the double blush was the presence of Mr. Cecil Monkton.

Victoria quickly recovered from the shock, but Aaron did not. He could not even make a remark to his wife to break the silence, which only aggravated his embarrassment the longer it lasted.

Just then something within him snapped, like the string of a fiddle.

For a moment he compared himself with Mr. Monkton, and thought the latter a happier-looking man than he was himself. Monkton seemed cheerful and satisfied in the company of the two ladies who were with him. They, no doubt, were much tickled by the interesting situation, and hardly took the trouble to hide their amusement.

Victoria, under the constant observation of Mr. Jack King, the acrobat-comedian, appeared serene, unconcerned. But she was conscious of the giggling going on near her, and inwardly boiled with fury. She was specially cross with Aaron, who appeared more upset than she considered necessary.

For an instant Mr. Monkton's eyes met Aaron's, and the two men exchanged greetings of a peculiar kind. Aaron experienced a sensation of supreme discomfort, such as a man might feel who had run into the arms of his chief creditor.

"Let me get out of this," was all he thought.

But he couldn't get out.

A heavy line furrowed his forehead, making him look martial and sinister. Mr. Monkton's eyes sought him out once more, then glanced away with nervous swiftness, as if to make sure that there was a door for eventual escape.

"I don't care a damn about it all," thought West, and picking up his glass he drained it. Then he held it up before his eyes like a telescope, and stared through its bottom at his wife, who appeared as a tiny freak on the horizon, far away from him. He then tried the glass trick on Mr. Monkton, to the disgust of the two ladies. Through the glass both his wife and Mr. Monkton appeared far away from him. Was it true? Were they? . . . Bodily, no . . . but in soul and spirit? Yes—just then. And just then he felt strange in his surroundings, strange even to himself.

A clergyman who was lunching near by with his wife and, presumably, his daughter (she had a nose like his), and who had been studying West's physiognomy for some time, now muttered to his women-folk, who stretched their necks to listen:

"That is a very odd man, I should say. Look what he is doing with his glass!" He looked towards West. "He's turning it on us now!"

He stopped dead, and his family posed in rigid propriety, as if they were sitting for an ecclesiastical group.

Victoria threatened Aaron under her breath.

"Put down that glass! Do you want to upset everybody? Idiot! I've never seen anything so rude in my life."

"All right," replied Aaron, with a vague grunt, putting down the glass. "But it's distinctly funny how far off everything appears to me all of a sudden."

Jack King, of course, was highly amused by Mr. West's genial behaviour. He left his table to speak to him, and rested a hand familiarly on Aaron's gorilla shoulder.

"You haven't tried your telescope trick on me, old sport. What have I done?"

And he laughed more immoderately than the excellent joke deserved.

Aaron frowned heavily.

"I can see you right enough without a glass, old sport," he said, giving another deep grunt.

There was a hidden menace in his voice that made Mr. King feel suddenly nervous and convivial.

"I'll see you to-night, I hope?" he said.

West growled. King interpreted this in his own way, and returned to his young lady friend, rather abashed.

Without knowing it Aaron had a peculiar power of making people nervous in his presence. A mere frown or a growl from him was enough to make anybody move away from him, filled with a certain uneasiness which, in some cases, amounted to fear that lasted as long as Aaron was in sight. This was probably one of the reasons why he had no real friends. A frowner and a growler, who looked dangerous into the bar-

gain, was not easily understood or approved of by civilised society.

When the *maître d'hôtel, en passant*, inquired from Mrs. West how she had liked the luncheon, she gave him a sweet smile. Aaron grunted for a cigar, but rejected several excellent brands and made a great fuss about getting the right sort. The waiter, very much like a duck in appearance, rushed to and fro in a cold fright, and finally succeeded in discovering the special box. Aaron drew out a cigar of the darkest colour, lighted it, and smoked wildly. Thick clouds tore away and caused irritation all around.

"I feel like stinking everybody out of this place!" he said to his wife.

Victoria was shocked, and replied:

"You will succeed, no doubt."

Her husband would now and then suddenly behave in a strange, almost savage way, and she was one of the people who were terrorised at such moments. Instinctively she endeavoured to be kind, sweet and lenient, to make as little opposition as possible. It was probably the safest thing she could do. Only diplomacy could govern Aaron at such times. If that failed she would lose her hold on him. Opposition might cause him to find himself, to discover his own strength; and that might mean the loss of her supremacy, ruin and wreck.

"Dust, dust in his eyes; keep him blind and submissive and there's smooth sailing!" she thought.

Her policy had always proved to be right until now.

The Wests left their table before Mr. Monkton and the yellow-haired wonder. Aaron smoked like a steamboat, passing in a cloud through the restaurant. Mrs. West had lost none of her royal dignity. She slipped her arm through her husband's: a long-forgotten practice. They left the *Hotel Cecil* and went next door into the Tivoli Music Hall.

Victoria hoped that the performance there would put Aaron into a better humour. From time to time she scrutinised his features, but the frown of danger still lurked about them. It remained during the whole of the entertainment; not even the grotesque Wilkie Bard's fireside humour could remove

it. Victoria's patience was sorely tried, and she resolved to dodge her husband after the performance, and to go to the Leicester Card Club to seek consolation with Mr. King.

"Better leave him alone," she thought. "He will be all right when we meet again to-night."

When Jack King performed, dressed in a leopard's skin, twisting his limbs and body (admirable they were, no doubt), and bringing off the most incredible tricks with the agility of a cat, Victoria did not look at her husband's face. She could feel its expression without seeing it. But she had something on her mind which weighed her down like iron. Perhaps she had better speak to him at once about it.

So she said.

"You know, Aaron, I've done an awful thing. I've asked him to come to supper at the flat to-night."

"Asked whom?" inquired Aaron.

"'Kingy,'—Jack King."

Aaron grunted a fearful word and that was all.

But that little word and its use in the present circumstances clearly showed Victoria his sullen, almost savage state of mind. "He must be soothed," she thought. The worst had been said. Now a dive for diplomacy.

"I'm a thoughtless woman," she explained in a whisper. "I ought to have known better. I don't know why I asked him to supper. I hate him myself. I'll go to the 'Leicester' afterwards and see if I can't catch him there and make some excuse. I'm sure he won't mind."

"Please yourself," Aaron said aloud, forgetting where he was. "I'm going to a Turkish bath."

There was tittering all round the Wests. But Aaron could not see the joke.

When the performance was over, the audience thronged out into the Strand, just as satisfied, just as wise, as when they had entered from the Strand three hours before.

The fog had now settled down on the streets, which were covered with black slime.

Aaron accompanied his wife to the Leicester Card Club, which happened to be on his way to a Turkish bath in Jermyn Street. When she disappeared in a lift, holding her skirt

tightly to her legs, and smiling sunshine at the lift-boy, he remembered his vision of her in the tumbler. He stood still when she had gone and imagined that she had gone from him for ever. In his mind her picture became smaller and smaller, and finally evaporated.

"Why the devil don't I feel pain at her disappearance?" he asked himself. "If she kept out of my sight for ever, I suppose life would go on just the same."

Chapter XIV

Something cried out in Aaron's heart that Victoria was leading him to destruction. Something within him kicked against being stifled and killed. Something wrestled to live. Was it the seed-corn? Had it sprouted under the foot of his wife, only to be trampled upon? Or had the first stalk pushed itself out crookedly like a blade of new grass under a stone, which, after a pale struggle for air and light, finally emerges from oppression showing a shy little green tip?

Aaron suddenly realised that this sort of life was no good to him, and he resolved to change it; at any rate, as far as he himself was concerned.

He stood still in Trafalgar Square and took a deep, vicious breath in the cold, raw wind that blew into his face from the river-side; then he buttoned up his coat.

A voluptuous-looking woman, her regular, powdered features lit up by a street lamp, stood shivering in the cold and smiled at him. Was she waiting for a cab? Aaron eyed her fiercely, as if he wanted to sweep her into the gutter with a single glance. But the pale smile only increased in size and became obnoxiously broad. He walked past her, swearing at her under his breath. But her smile followed him up the steps of the Turkish bath. It was familiar to him. Who else smiled like that? . . . Somebody did—somebody. But who was she? He couldn't say.

In the restful peace of the Oriental bath, Aaron, baking like a loaf, made a mental effort to string together the events of

the day and to think out something definite about his future. Turkish baths have the langour and heat of the East, and are invented no doubt to make people sweat without labour and to get the poison of sin within them to the surface of their skin.

There were only three fellow-bathers with him. One was a sinewy gentleman with short grey hair and martial, pepper-coloured moustaches, who might well have been an Indian official. Then there was an enormous, very fleshy Jew, with a diamond ring, and a smell of money about him (not money coming in, but money going out for fleecing purposes). His eyes looked like pools of uneasiness, in which were mirrored bills of exchange; their little waters seemed to ripple as if stirred by an influx of savage interests. The third bather was a customer of colour, from Persia, perhaps, or somewhere thereabouts. He looked apprehensive, subtle and supple, eager to grasp, eager to retain in his mind what he saw. In the conversation which he opened at once with the fat financier, it came out that he was a student at Guy's Hospital. The sinewy gentleman's speech was as short as his hair. He sweated over the political news in the *Westminster Gazette*.

No doubt Aaron was guided by Providence and sweated by command of fate. During the process of bodily purification his mind was incidentally spring-cleaned. He had always considered himself beneath Victoria. He liked looking up to her and being at her feet. But in spite of that it was evident that she was far away from him, that his real self was a total stranger to her. Yet now the realisation of the distance between them caused him no active pain. Was he sick of her? If she died at that moment—if he had to live on alone in the flat—if she had gone from him irrevocably? . . .

He hated to think of such things.

She was his comfort; he could not exist without her. It was horrible to think that without her he would be obliged to have recourse to the consolations of his earlier days, and to throw himself on the powdered sirens of the great cities. He wouldn't do that again. Victoria could not be replaced by any other. With her disappearance he would lose his whole

happiness, and he was afraid—mortally afraid—of being left alone.

So he could not afford to lose her. He had to keep her to himself at all costs.

But to bring about a change in his present life was necessary. He was not cut out for his present existence. There was only one place where he could be really happy and find his true self again: the seas!

What would Victoria say to that?

She hated the seas; she always said so, and he knew she meant it. It was impossible to suggest taking her on the water. She was a born land-lubber. So he must put up with it. No; he couldn't put up with it. The only reasonable way out was for him to sail alone. It would not be for ever. He would come back to her, be happy with her again. He had plenty of money to provide for her comforts during his absence.

Aaron felt he could not stick to England any longer. For some time there had been something in the air that had made him long for far-off lands. Out of the cold, the wet, the damp and fog, out of it all into the quivering sunshine—out!—away! Far from the powdered, sickly, polished West, from the varnished boots, the theatres and places of humbug, from the packs of wolves that prey on one another! Far from the idle Sundays and the bells ringing out to God, the idle week-days—the games—the morocco arm-chairs!

"Oh, God, let me live!" cried Aaron in his heart.

When he saw the skin of the dark student he was almost ashamed of his white one. How could that man leave the heat, the uncovered glory of the land of sun-worshippers to come to the West—to study Western diseases? . . .

Whether it was the heat of the bath, or the heat of his temperament that overpowered Aaron at that moment, one could not say for certain. It was a good thing that he was seized with that frenzy in a quiet bath and not in the streets. Otherwise, for all one knew about him, he might have run his head against a stone wall, or got thoroughly drunk. For the mere whiff of a bit of real freedom, or what he termed "change,"

made him dangerously buoyant; made him ache to be far away, in a new, strange world of bright colours.

That letter from the "Consulat Général de France" was at the bottom of it all. It said that he could have all the rights of ownership over the island, with some political reservations. His attention was drawn to the following facts: that there was no landing for any large craft at the island, and that it was considered to be "volcanic." The lease contract was drawn for a period of fifty years with option to renew. The amount asked was 75,000 francs for the first fifty years; 25,000 francs for the next fifty. There was nothing beyond that. So the French Government probably thought that the world would come to an end then, or, if not, that the island—or what was left of it by that time—would fall back to its owner, *i. e.*, the French Government, by the grace of God.

About eight months ago Phillips had written to Captain Aaron West an interesting letter. It began with: "I've done them in the eye." Of course, he meant the French Government. Phillips was a capital fellow! He had seen the Wests off on the steamer from Fiji when they sailed for London after their visit to the island.

He himself had remained in port with the *Amadea* for some time afterwards, and there he had had some business with the Consul on account of the log, as the *Amadea* was once more to be converted into a trading vessel. That business had kept him there, and he seemed to have drawn out his stay for a long time. The real reason for the delay, however, had been the French man-o'-war that had lain anchored off Fiji. He said, in his very long letter to West, that he had "smelt a rat" when he saw the Frenchman. Somehow he had wangled his way into the French captain's heart, and had soon found out that he was sailing under orders to an island somewhere round about the "Societies," and was to make a report to the Admiralty.

"I put me hands in me pockets and larfed at him, and he took it like a gentleman he was," said the letter. "I told him he had jest mist you, good Mr. West, and that you was blue in the face because you couldn't land anywhere on that island. I showed him the log and he saw that we bin sailing all

round the spot. And when he asked what we done in the two days, I put me hands on me sides again and larfed at him and says I, 'Killing sharks. The master is a good sport.' "

Aaron knew the sort Captain Phillips had met. No doubt he had cruised where he was ordered to, but would hardly have taken the trouble, after the information he had received from Phillips, to investigate the island thoroughly. Probably he had just steamed round about there, running his telescope over the barrier reef. Besides, life aboard a patrol cruiser was a lazy one and monotonous to the last degree. A good harbour was more cherished by officers and crew than long journeys over the wide oceans; and if a hocus-pocus story or a faked log could make up for an extra run of a couple of hundred miles, one or other was often put forward to conceal a dereliction of duty. After all, who verified all the reports coming from the Pacific Islands? The most contradictory records ever concocted by men of all nations came from the Polynesian Archipelago.

There were thousands of pounds' worth of cocoa-nut on the island. Even if the Frenchman had seen them, the price asked of Aaron (75,000 francs) meant "go and get the nuts yourself."

Behind the cocoa-nuts, the *Amadea*, the sea and the surf on the corals, there lurked in Aaron's soul a deep longing for another taste of something higher and finer than his imagination could conjure up before his senses.

He longed to sit with his back against a rock on the island mount and to let the trade winds blow through his hair while he gazed out over the blue Pacific. He longed to listen to the chirping birds among the bushes, to drown himself in the warm air of the tropical forests, to sweat in the heat of the sun.

He longed to see some life come into the figure of the saint that was stowed away in his drowsy memory. He craved for words from her, for the deep song of her voice. The mere thought of her seemed to bring light, sweetness and charm to him and made his lazy pulse quiver with life.

"Why have I never thought more of her?" he asked himself. "Through all these months in darkness she has been

my only star of hope. Why have I not been grateful enough to recognise that fact? I am not fit to think of her. I who crave for her presence, ought to shrink from her and hide myself. She is pure and great, whilst I am covered with mud, a brute, a useless fellow. How do I compare with her? I am not worthy to touch her white garment, not fit to look on her purity. I should soil it with my eyes which are accustomed to foul and wicked things. How dare I think of her with a brain that is stuffed with muddy and horrid ideas?"

Gradually the sudden light which had seemed to come with the mere thought of Somna began to fade. Aaron's heart returned to darkness.

He thought of the native chief. He saw him—his cracked skin, his savage, wonderful tattooing, his bulgy lips, and became uneasy. The man was diseased, rotten. . . . And Somna! He lived but a day's journey from her. He was free, a savage!

Hell!

What had happened on the island? Had the man-o'-war perhaps called there after all? Had French sailors tramped over it?

Damn!

What was holy and great to them? Were they any better than savages? Or were they Europeans like others—perhaps like himself? What had he done when, in his former life, he had returned from a long cruise?

Before Aaron rose black clouds. He was seized with anxiety about Somna. She was his saint. He believed in her as a supernatural being. Good God! If anything had happened to her. He would die, bleed slowly to death for her; but with him would die the one who had dragged her in the mud. Aaron swore a bitter oath, and his heart throbbed savagely.

The sudden anxiety grew in him, almost ravaged him. Evil imagination awoke and brought before him terrible pictures. He was Lord of the island. He was going to possess it. His mind became firm on that point. But he was thousands of miles away from his property to be, whilst in imagination he saw his possessions destroyed by ruffians, his valuables trampled on and stolen. He saw a savage carrying off Somna—and in

his mind he raged against the unknown perpetrator of crime. Woe to any man who had interfered with his authority during his absence. The mere thought of finding himself face to face with him filled Aaron with ferocity. He would track the villain down, spare no time or money; and in the end would "do him in" with his own hands. By God, he would! . . . He swore it.

* * * * *

On his way home he heard midnight strike from St. James's. The general traffic had ceased and the footsteps of West End night-birds sounded hollow and individual. He walked all the way to the Albert Hall, and as he walked he reflected upon the practical side of his resolution, which suddenly made him feel bitterness, almost a dumb hatred, against Victoria. If only she were the sort one could speak to frankly, make things clear to in a few words, how easy it would all be. But she was fussy, and he would have to be careful how he broke his young decision to her, how he worded his intentions. Otherwise she might kick and trample them to the ground.

Perhaps at this very moment the yellow wonder was feasting with her in the flat!

"Damn that fellow, and damn Victoria for allowing him to be near her," thought Aaron. "Well may she apologise for having asked him to supper." . . . She had gone to the club to put him off if possible. Had she succeeded in doing so? Did she want to succeed at all? She knew what he thought of King—but evidently they differed about him.

"I'd like to give that fellow a thorough, good thrashing," Aaron reflected. "I hate him. I wouldn't trust his intentions for the world. Victoria is a pretty woman. King, no doubt, is a man whom some women might consider a wonderful sort of creature. Let's hope Victoria isn't one of them. If she were, I should kill her. That's all."

Aaron's state of mind became critical. He felt as if he couldn't stick in England for another week without going under, morally and physically. The pleasures of London had made his life threadbare and faded. His red blood spent it-

self in idleness; by degrees he was becoming water-blooded, anæmic. Soon he would lose all his strength, and end by being a mere vegetable.

And all Victoria seemed to do was to urge him on in his career of doom, help him to go down the ladder step by step. Where would it end if he didn't stop it?

Every fibre of his body, every drop of his blood cried out for heat and sunshine; but what his heart and soul desired was far away from London.

"Somna, Somna!" he cried. "Somna!—save me, for God's sake!"

For a moment Aaron stood still and prayed to God—far away from him. The prayer was short and selfish.

"God help me to get away from all this and become happier and better."

And once more Somna's light step seemed to sound in his ears as she led him along the path of happiness, away from earthly things to something higher and finer, to a new land, an island paradise, where his heart might rest in peace, where divine glory is lavished on the head of even the humblest.

* * * * *

Victoria had met "Kinky" at the club right enough.

She looked at him significantly, and they went to a remote corner to have a talk.

"He hasn't taken a fancy to me," said Kinky. "I thought he wouldn't."

"I don't think it's any use my trying to arrange another meeting between him and you," replied Victoria. "He doesn't like you. He hates you."

Kinky smiled.

"Small wonder," he said. "Perhaps he'd hate me still more if he knew everything."

"For God's sake keep quiet," she replied. "He'd kill us both, you fool. You don't know him."

"I should take some killing," said Kinky, looking sharply into her eyes.

There was a pause.

Then Victoria said, "Perhaps you'd better not come to supper at our flat to-night. Keep out of his way."

A flush spread over Kingy's face.

"All right," he replied, sneering calmly. "But if you let me down, I'll find consolation with Sybil."

Victoria looked into his eyes with furious jealousy.

"If you do that, I'll drop you."

"Will you?" he said. "What about him? If he knew about it, whom would he kill first, you or me?"

Victoria trembled with excitement.

"Do you mean to——?"

"I mean nothing, Vic," he cut into her speech. He leaned over her. "Don't look so terrified. Perhaps I'd better not come to supper to-night, and I shan't go to Sybil. You know I care only for you."

He took her hand and pressed it hard, yet without hurting her.

"You've been talking about getting rid of him for some time, but you never do it," he continued.

"You don't know the difficulties," she said.

"Money?" remarked Kingy, with a shifty look.

"That's only one of them."

"Then what are they?"

"He might be suspicious if I suggest his going away, then he might stay on and——"

"Go on!" said Kingy. "You've never tried yet to get him out of the way. I for one can see that he'd be pleased to go for a time."

"Well, I will try," she replied. "I'll do my best to get him away. I'll try to-night."

"Why don't you try to make him feel sick of you?"

"Sick!" repeated Victoria, with a deep chest note. "He'd never be sick. I pride myself on that."

Kingy looked intensely jealous.

"I'm not going to stand it any longer," he said, in a furious voice. "I'll have you or not have you—but no half measures."

Kingy's eyes looked pathetic, which quite touched Victoria. After a long silence she proposed:

"Let's go to your flat. We can talk things over quietly there. As to money matters—I think I can manage the five hundred pounds for you, if you wait another week."

"Come on, then!" said Kingy, springing to his feet. "Let's hurry. My turn comes on at half-past nine." He looked at his watch. "We've got a couple of hours till then," he added.

Mr. King and Mrs. West went to a flat in Shepherd's Bush, and were indeed a fine couple.

At ten o'clock, pale and exhausted, Mrs. West arrived at her own flat near the Albert Hall. She had walked part of the way in great haste. She wanted to get home before her husband, to have a bath, make herself comfortable, sit down, read or smoke, and be ready waiting for him when he arrived.

He had said he would be late—but perhaps he would not. He was such a funny fellow. At the door of the flat she trembled. She held her throat with her hand, as if afraid of Aaron's sinewy fingers getting there.

She entered the little hall.

Aaron's hat and coat were not there! Thank God for it!

She breathed more freely and felt calmer.

An hour later she went into the dining-room, looking spick and span.

She pushed a morocco arm-chair up to the fire, and glanced over the supper table—laid for three.

Lobster mayonnaise, champagne, caviare—all the best, and no Kingy to share them, and he was potty on caviare.

She sat reading for a while, but when midnight struck, her eyelids drooped, her skin coloured up on the cheekbones, and she "napped."

Aaron found her asleep in the arm-chair.

The supper was untouched. Evidently the yellow wonder had not been in his home.

Now Aaron looked a fool. How could he have suspected that there was anything between them? He went into his bedroom, stuck his feet into a pair of morocco slippers,

and wrapped himself in a dressing-gown of Jaeger wool.

Then he came back to Victoria.

He scrutinised her features in the dim red light falling from the shaded lamp above the dining-table. He loved to look at her. She was beautiful, voluptuous. He wavered in his tremendous resolution. His buoyancy calmed down. Was he, after all, strong enough to part from her?

Leaning against the mantelpiece, and turning his big face towards the fire, for some minutes he stared into the flames. Then Victoria opened her eyes and said:

"Halloh, Aaron dear."

"Halloh!" he replied. Then he turned round and kissed her. "Why didn't you go to bed?" he asked.

"I've been waiting for you since nine o'clock."

"You needn't have done so."

"What is the matter, Aaron? You don't look quite as usual."

"I had a T.B. Perhaps I look cleaner than usual."

"No—something in your eyes—there's something you want to say, perhaps?"

"Rubbish!"

"Yes," she insisted. "We've had a very unsatisfactory day, Aaron, but, thank God, it's over. Look"—she pointed to the supper table—"I've obeyed your command, and have put off the yellow wonder. His place is laid, but he isn't here. He never will be. I had to be rude to him. But I'm very glad I did it. They told me at the club that he's a rotter and after money. That's possibly why he tried to wangle himself into our house."

"I'm sure of it," said Aaron. "I'm glad you had the sense to get rid of him."

He took a deep breath.

Victoria watched him very carefully. She seemed to be waiting for a chance to seize the slightest opportunity for saying something important.

"Shall we eat?" she suggested. "You must be hungry."

"I don't feel like it somehow," said Aaron, lighting a cigarette and holding his toes out towards the glowing fire.

"Don't you feel well?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, quite. Why?"

"Because you've behaved so oddly all day."

"In what way?"

"That strange behaviour of yours at the *Cecil*——"

"That was nothing."

"Then you hardly spoke a word afterwards."

"Must a man always talk?"

"No," she said, and was silent for a while, looking sad.

"Have I done anything you don't like?" she then asked.

"No, of course not."

She rose from the morocco arm-chair and stood straight before him, looking into his eyes.

"I hope, Aaron dear, I do hope I have not made you unhappy. I can feel you are worrying about that man King."

She put both her arms on his shoulders and clasped her hands behind his neck.

"But I swear I hate him like poison, and never wish to see his face again."

"I'm not jealous," he said sullenly.

She clasped her hands more firmly, and a warm glow came into her eyes: love, no doubt.

"But I know you are—just a little bit? Yes? Why shouldn't you be? You do love me, don't you?"

"You know——"

"Well—and I love you, care only for you, and I should always care for you, even if I were thousands of miles away from you. I could not love anybody else." Aaron turned his head slowly and gazed at her intently. "Would you be able to love another woman if you were thousands of miles away from me?" she continued, with a teasing smile.

"Never," he replied, and took a short breath.

She could see his mind travelling. Her carefully worded suggestion of a few thousand miles between them had set his brain working.

"Now, careful—careful," said Victoria to herself, and reflected.

"Have you ever hated me?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes—I have."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a fool. In reality it must always have been love."

"When was it?"

"To-night."

She laughed.

"I knew there was something," she said. Then she reflected again. "Is it because of the life we lead here? Is it because you would like to take me away for a change?"

"No," he replied. "I know I couldn't take you away for a change without making you unhappy, and I should hate to leave you."

Excitedly he tore the letter from the French Consulate from his pocket. His haste caused him to blush suddenly, and he said:

"Read that, Vic—and I'll tell you afterwards."

She took the letter under the lamp and read it, not less excitedly, but before she had finished a cloud of sorrow came over her brow. Finally, when she gave the letter back to Aaron, there were tears in her eyes.

"Now I understand, Aaron," she said in a low voice. "I understand all. That's what made you so downhearted to-day. But I must tell you something. I've had a bad conscience for some time because I saw you were unhappy living this sort of life. I said to myself: after all, how could you be happy, even with the best of wives, living for a whole year on land and never going on the sea? I saw you suffering because I was selfish and ruthless in my affection for you. I oughtn't to stand in your way, and I can feel that you must do something to get back your old spirits. That conflict between us of love and hatred for the sea is a bitter thing in our married life. We must put it aside. Otherwise it may lead to permanent unhappiness."

Victoria spoke with such grave conviction that Aaron felt quite meek. Bit by bit he saw her clearing away the fog from his eyes; she seemed to drag his own sentiments out of his heart, to speak the very words he wanted to say, and in a much nicer and better form than he could have found.

Victoria was not slow in seeing that she had touched the vital spot; she knew it by the almost fierce reaction in her

husband's face. She saw that she was on the right track, and resolved to mould Aaron while he was soft, and to settle at once how matters should be between them in the future.

"Shall I come with you to the island?" she asked, with great sincerity.

"I could not accept that sacrifice," he replied. "I would rather stay here, although I know I shall turn 'gaga' if I don't see a bit of real sea soon."

It was the very answer Victoria wanted. But she could not press the point much more without danger. She wanted Aaron to take up the subject now, to say that he wished to go, in order that she might put the responsibility of his departure on his shoulders.

Aaron thought he was a fool ever to have thought that Vic was not a sensible wife. She was more than sensible, she was generous and understanding. She held out freedom—all he wanted—to him, and now he made a hungry, reckless snatch for it.

"You mean to say you don't mind my going away for a year?" he asked quickly.

"I do mind," she said emphatically. "But what is a year in the lifetime of two married people? Especially as the island might mean a fortune to us—a new future—a house in the country—a yacht, perhaps!"

"And children?" he asked fervently.

"And, perhaps, children," she answered, with a sweet smile.

"Oh, Vic," cried Aaron in ecstasy, "the mere thought of it all makes me mad with joy."

"It's got to be fought for, though," she said. "We are not rich people."

"We've got money."

"Yes, but you'll want it."

"I shall only want some of it—a couple of thousand or so. The rest I shall leave behind; I will even have my Metropolitan Stock, of which I possess £20,000, transcribed in your name, so that if anything happens, if I should die, you will have no bother and trouble and can just do with it what

you like. You will, in a way, take care of my fortune, Vic; I'll leave you £2,000 to spend, and if the French Government deal goes through during my absence, you must sell enough of the Metropolitan Stock to pay for the whole business. It will be about three thousand pounds."

She laughed. "Oh, Aaron, you do make complicated arrangements."

"Never mind, Vic. It's all for the best. If ever I go smash over this island business, no one can take away the £20,000 if it's in your name."

"Go smash?" she laughed again. "But you haven't even decided yet whether you will go."

Aaron walked up and down the room excitedly.

Yes—he had decided, but she had not—it was her decision he awaited. He stood still, staring at her like a demented gorilla—waiting for it, asking for it, begging for it.

"What do *you* think?" he asked.

"I'm your wife," she said. "I must do my duty in the matter. Only a woman knows how to bear sacrifice, and it is made easier for a woman who loves, fortunately. Men don't know."

Aaron took her in his arms and she bent her swan-like neck to receive his battering-ram kisses.

He was happy; everything had come his way.

She was happy; she had given fate a twist.

They sat down and feasted on lobster salad and caviare, and the cork flew from the bottle of Moët and Chandon with rare joy.

At 2 a.m. Victoria once more kissed Aaron good-night and went to bed, leaving him in the midst of sorting out his papers on a little side-table next to a safe.

She turned off the light in her bedroom and listened as she lay in bed. She hoped that Aaron would not come near her that night, but would go on working till the morning.

Left alone, Aaron drew a deep breath, like a man just released from prison.

"She is a sensible, a perfect wife," he thought. "Here she is, and here she will remain, just for me—as it should be—

until I return to her. Why—just the right kind of woman for a sea captain!”

He drew bundles of papers from the safe and spread them out before him. Alternately he seated himself and got up again. Finally, he lighted a cigar. Then he wrote out a cable five times, and at last settled on the wording.

It was addressed to John Phillips, C/o Messrs. Kenderley & Sons (please forward), and said: “Have *Amadea* ready, 'Frisco, January. Sailing island.—West.”

“In the morning will do for that,” he muttered to pacify his impatience.

He messed about for a long time among all sorts of papers, stuffed and re-stuffed pocket-books. He found a photograph of Vic in a bathing dress, and this he crammed between the folds of a pocket-case where it could hardly get in. Then he pulled an Admiralty chart from a shelf, went to the dining table, and, pushing aside lobster salad, caviare, bottles, glasses, forks and all, he spread it out before him and brooded over it for an hour.

Then he gathered together pocket-books, letters, papers, his will and the chart, and stowed them back into the safe in careful order; he locked the safe, put the key in his pocket and sneaked quietly off to bed, afraid lest he should awaken poor, dear Victoria.

* * * * *

On a horrid December day, Aaron walked away from the flat carrying a shabby kit-bag in his hand. He was going to pick up a passing hansom.

He had asked Victoria not to come with him for fear there might be a scene. She stayed behind and looked after him through the white curtains of the flat. She thought he looked a regular ruffian in his old-fashioned seaman's get up—going third-class all the way!

“Good-bye, Victoria!”

“Good-bye, Aaron!”

Chapter XV

On the receipt of Captain West's cable Master Phillips drank like a fish and was fuddled for ten nights in succession. Then he thought he'd better stop it, and not go entirely to the dogs. Towards January his heart became heavy as lead, his state of mind almost alarming. Never was misery written more plainly on a man's face than it was on his when the train in which Mr. West was to arrive steamed into San Francisco station.

"Now then," thought Phillips, "I'll tell him all about it."

But when he saw his burly captain walking towards him he almost fell upon his neck in sudden ecstasy and let off the steam of his joy in a long string of curses and self-abuse.

West had come alone—not with her ladyship—all the way alone! They would sail alone—without her. And he had thought all along that she would naturally come, too. He had been ready to tell Captain West, "I'm off, I'm not coming. I won't come if she's there again." But now, finding there was no need for all this, Master Phillips was quite overwhelmed with pleasure.

"Now then," he suggested at once, "let's come an' 'ave one, begad. I've been pining to sec ye, Mr. West. Come on in 'ere."

"How is she?" inquired Aaron.

"Thumbs," replied Phillips.

They went into the station buffet and never left it until three hours later, when the bond of the seas between them had been thoroughly overhauled and renewed.

Aaron took breakfast aboard his schooner next morning.

Ben Philpot danced about like an excited billy goat, but managed to cook a steak *à la perfection*. There was also a bottle of champagne, into which Master Phillips had a good look.

Aaron was not unaware of his crew's loyalty. It struck him in the eyes at the very door of his cabin, where he read over and over again the illuminated, garlanded "Welcome

Home." He was quite touched and softened by it, and found a pretext to be generous. The crew had no doubt counted on his human feelings, and now found their thoughtfulness recoiling upon them in the shape of a bonus of ten dollars per head: enough to wash down the dust of the land before leaving it.

A few days later the *Amadea* slipped out to the Pacific, making for the island, and never did schooner have a more pleasant journey. Never did a crew have a better time at sea.

When the island was sighted Aaron just ached all over to set foot upon it, and to rush to the little hut among the bread-fruit trees, with its low beds, its mast, its crucifix and the monstrance. He was ready to enjoy everything: the fierce sun, the warm, languid air among the tall cocoa palms, the cool stream. He would strip off his coat, shirt and trousers and wade into the silent pool. He would drink from the crystal water, and cool his burning temples with it. But first and above all he would go to Somna, listen to her words, speak to her.

Somna! Somna! His heart began to beat quickly when he thought of her.

The *Amadea* was safely moored in the lagoon. She was lying to the west this time, not to the east as on the first occasion. The air was fresh, almost chilly in the early morning when Aaron pushed the little whaler off to get ashore.

"I'll go and see how things are," he said to Phillips. "In the meantime, manœuvre her close to the shore so that we can get the loads out with ease. I'll be at the old spot to-morrow morning—where I was before."

"If we're going to stay here for gad knows how long," replied Phillips, "we'd p'raps better take the tools with us to-morrow and see what we can do in the way of building a 'ut or a 'ouse."

"That's it," said West. "When you come ashore to-morrow, sing out for me. Don't blast off the tubes and frighten the bally birds from the bushes as you did last time."

"What abaht 'er?" inquired Phillips, tapping his hands on the railing of the *Amadea*.

"Get as close ashore as possible; it'll be more comfortable for the sort of life we shall lead."

"Right O, Mr. West. Good luck to yer."

Aaron pulled the oars, and before the keel of the whaler cut into the silver dust of the shore the sun was up and drew the moisture out of his skin, which had already taken on a hue of bronze.

At that moment Aaron's mind was perhaps the most curious mixture of sentiments ever juggled together in a man's heart and brain. Satisfaction at being free and near to the island, mixed with tense anxiety as to what might have happened there during his absence, made him pull the oars quickly. But in his heart a whispering voice made him reflect and feel sad. He was approaching the place where for two days he had lived a strange life; where secret forces had overpowered him; and now he almost shrank from these sensations, which by degrees seemed to be getting hold of him again. They made him feel shy and his courage dropped.

Perhaps Somna would not be the same Somna. Perhaps she had grown into a different woman while he had been away from her. How would he address her? How would he speak to her? Would he bend his knees to her?

When Aaron had drawn the whaler up on to the beach he stood still in the magic silence that embraced all the mysteries and happiness for which he craved. The golden virgin rose from sleep in his soul and stepped out; her spirit engulfed him; she held out her hand to help and to guide him.

Aaron fell on his knees and prayed. He did not know what he prayed for, but doubtless God, who knows all tongues and dialects, could understand the ardent cry of that burly, rough sea captain on the lonely island beach, whose heart was full of remorse and anxiety to be good. He sent a balmy rain upon the seed-corn that was dying of thirst in a human heart.

He also sent a vision to Somna.

* * * * *

She was in Tunga at that moment, preaching His laws to the dark hearts. Suddenly she was overcome by a strange thrill. She closed her eyes and prayed in silence.

The natives (a great many more than there had been a year ago, since a new lot of about two hundred souls had landed on the island during Aaron's absence) gazed at her anxiously.

And Somna saw that the great white man had landed. She saw the great ship, foreign men coming ashore. In her heart she thanked God, and said to the heathen:

"Jehovah has given to me a sign of His divine presence among us. The great white man arrived on the island with the rising sun. Go thou, Marva-rao, and take six men with thee to the mountain pass, and see that Jehovah has spoken truth through poor humble Tata-hita."

Marva-rao took six men with him and hastened to the mountain pass, and they all saw the schooner in the distance.

Then they returned to Tunga.

A great blast sang out through the horn, and the village assembled.

"Tata-hita saw indeed truly," they said. "Jehovah must be great."

Then Tenania waddled through the crowd, shooting fearful glances, like those of a wild boar, at Somna.

"Great bastard liar," she said, "hast thou not been up to the great mountain and seen the ship of the cursed white man with thine own eyes? May the great shark devour thee, false child of Oro, and with thee the white men who have killed our fathers with the foulness of their white bodies."

There was a general murmur.

Then the towering, tattooed figure of Marva-rao stepped forward.

"Go thou, Tenania, wild pig, hide thy face! May thy lips be eaten by leprosy for ever. Tata-hita speaks truly."

There was general assent.

Tata-hita held out her hand.

"Thou must not curse, Marva-rao," she said in a deep, sad voice. "If thou wilt be a true child of Jehovah, bridle thy tongue and be kind to Tenania."

No sooner had Tenania heard Somna's words than she came forward, her steps hastened by hatred, and, swinging a stick through the air, she hit Somna on the neck.

Somna fell.

There was a deep silence.

Tenania gazed at the prostrate figure with ferocious hatred, and drew herself up to her full height so that the tattooed shark was stretched across her deformed breasts and her skin became scaly like that of a boa. She looked at Marva-rao and a wild squeak came from her foam-covered mouth. Then she turned and waddled majestically through the lane of natives that opened before her commanding bulk.

Somna rose from the ground, holding her bruised neck with one hand, and extended the other towards Tenania.

"Bad child of Jehovah," she said. "But Jehovah great, Jehovah also forgives Tenania."

There was a great hiss from the crowd, and a tramping of naked feet.

Marva-rao's lips bulged up.

"Prove thou Jehovah's strength against the stick of Oro," he said, "and I will be a sheep or a dog, and not the son of the great Marva-rao, who died of the white man's God's disease."

* * * * *

In the meantime Aaron was stepping through the forest, a new man. To him a year had become the dream of an hour that had passed. To wander in this paradise seemed his real life. Restless in sweet expectation, he headed in the direction of the hut that stood under the bread-fruit trees. In the scorching heat of mid-day he arrived there and paused. With eager eyes he looked at the door overhung with matting.

Perhaps at any moment Somna might step out and smile at him in surprise.

But nobody came out of the hut, so Aaron went to bring the surprise with him.

He carefully drew aside the matting and looked in.

Somna was not there, only Mother Sabeth, whose piercing eyes were fixed upon him as if she had been expecting him.

She made the sign of the cross, rose up to her full height and said:

"Be thou welcome, great white man. In come here. Blessed

Jehovah. Somna gone Tunga. Been away five sunsets, but will return. Wait thou."

Aaron entered, offered his hand to Mother Sabeth and said:

"God is great. He has brought me back to you."

Then Mother Sabeth bent down her head and rubbed her cheek against his.

"Art hungry? Art thirsty?" she asked. "Eat, drink."

And she pointed to the bread-fruit and the calabash.

"No, thank you," said Aaron. "How is your health, Mother Sabeth?"

"Oh," she replied, with a sour look, "I much good, I thank Jehovah. I not much help need now."

"I am very glad," said Aaron.

He paused for a while, then continued:

"You say Somna has gone to Tunga and has not returned for five days?" His voice trembled as he added, "Has anything happened to her?"

"No," replied Mother Sabeth. "Somna always go to Tunga long time now and work among children of Oro. Build house for great Jehovah."

"All alone among the dark souls?"

"Yes, yes," replied Mother Sabeth. "All alone, but Marva-rao help, and others, much much more children of darkness have arrived from Honoruru during thine absence; great King Wasawu and much woman and children. But Marva-rao killed Wasawu in great fight, and now listen to voice of God. Somna teach him also great white man's tongue."

"Has anything else of importance occurred on the island during my absence?" inquired Aaron.

Mother Sabeth looked at him dismally and said:

"No happen—soul of husband mine not return."

Aaron's heart was heavy.

What had happened to Somna?

Evidently Mother Sabeth could tell him nothing, except that Somna had been away for five days. But Marva-rao played an important part in her speech. She was a native. Did she perhaps in the secrecy of her own heart nurse certain

ideas about Marva-rao in connection with Somna? Aaron shuddered at the thought, and scrutinised Mother Sabeth with suspicion. But she looked so simple and suffering that he said to himself:

"No, she could not play such a game."

He thought of going over to Tunga at once. But Phillips was to come ashore the next morning to holloa out for him, and he would not have time to get back to meet him. Besides, whatever had happened he could not alter. Nevertheless, what was going to happen he would see to.

In his heart he was certain that Somna could do no wrong. The natives, Marva-rao included, looked upon her as a goddess. Her intellect was far above theirs, and she seemed to feel quite safe in their midst. The only fear that set him trembling was the thought of the possible presence of white men on the island during his absence. He could never trust them; he knew them too well.

"Have white men been here since I saw you last?" he inquired.

"No. White men not here since thou last seen Mother Sabeth," she replied.

His mind became easier. He resolved to stay where he was and to wait for Somna's return. If she did not come he would go to meet Phillips on the morrow, give him instructions, and then hurry over to Tunga to see her. So he asked Mother Sabeth if he might remain with her.

"Stay thou, and Somna returned much much pleased will be," she replied.

Aaron lay down on the matting on the floor and rested, for the heat was prodigious and he felt moist all over.

He lay still for an hour in a state of drowsy happiness.

Mother Sabeth sat silent and rigid on her couch and never moved. Aaron concluded that she passed most of her time in that state of absolute nothingness. He tried to trace some likeness to Somna in her features, but could not. Nor could he guess her age. To judge from her scragginess, and her thousands of leathery wrinkles, she might be a hundred years old. But that, of course, was impossible. Somna was no more than twenty, and no doubt the child of a young mother.

Her father, a white missionary, must have been very much attracted by Mother Sabeth, otherwise why should he have married her and lived with her? Aaron remembered Somna telling him that the three of them had left Tahiti, and that then her father had cried. But she was a little girlie then and of course did not understand. Aaron was curious, and asked Mother Sabeth, who seemed mortally frightened at the sudden sound of his voice in the hut:

"Tell me, Mother Sabeth," he said, "who was your husband? You don't mind my asking you, I hope, but I am anxious to hear about my white brother."

"Husband mine—great he was—missionary in Tahiti. Mista Lewis called by other white men. But all gone—finished—dead in Mother Sabeth—not know much in memory. Weak in past."

Aaron was sad when she said this. Evidently her memory had become feeble through years of suffering. There was no doubt in his mind that she suffered from a wasting disease, and looking at her limbs, which were nothing but skin and bones, he wondered how she could still resist death.

"Have you nothing that your husband left behind which would enable me to get to know something about him?" Aaron asked.

Mother Sabeth sat up straight and a light came into her eyes, as if she had thought of something. She began to cough at the same moment. No doubt she was excited.

"In box, there, great white man," she said, pointing with her crooked forefinger to the cabin trunk. "All husband mine. But locked."

Aaron went over to the box and saw that it was locked with a padlock. There was no key.

"May I open it?" he asked.

"Open, yes, great white man."

"I'm afraid I shall have to break it open."

"Open—yes. Break open."

Aaron took a large knife from his pocket, and soon forced the lock.

With deep interest he opened the box.

A worn-out navy blue suit was on the top. He spread it

out. All the pockets were empty. There were a pair of brown boots of London make (also worn out), a Panama hat, a pocket knife, a large knife, a revolver with three cartridges, a box of matches, two pipes, and an empty tobacco pouch.

Aaron paused, looking sad. Two pipes and no tobacco! He remembered that Somna had once told him that her father had cried because all the tobacco was gone.

"Poor old chap," he muttered. "I wish I had been in time for you."

Digging further into the trunk he came across a Testament and a row of books on botany, theology, literature; various romances, and some essays by a man he had never heard of—"Schopenhauer." On the front page of the New Testament, in letters that looked like iron railings, was written:

"To my darling son, Frank, on his fourteenth birthday. From Mother."

Aaron then discovered a small photograph album containing about a dozen or so portraits of old-fashioned and respectable faces, fading away. Some were almost unrecognisable; others were better preserved; but all possessed a contented, posthumous smile and looked very pleased with themselves. After some time spent in laying out the late missionary's estate on the floor, Aaron took up a copy-book in which "the Reverend Frank Lewis" had copied his letters. In a tin box he found bundles of correspondence neatly folded and strung together with thin flaxen cord of the native kind.

"Are these your late husband's letters?" he asked Mother Sabeth, who started up from her dream about nothingness at the sound of a human voice.

She nodded her head.

"Husband mine—yes. Take all, thou, his brother."

"May I read some of his letters, Mother Sabeth? It may give me knowledge of your late husband that might be to your advantage."

"Yes, brother husband mine—read all."

Aaron kept the books and correspondence, replaced the other belongings and shut the cabin trunk. Then he seated himself on the top of it, and stared at Mother Sabeth for a long time.

He wondered how many lives would be involved in the secrets spread out before him on the floor like a rubbish heap, and wondered, too, why human beings cling to all their little rubbish so faithfully. What instinct compels them to retain worthless odds and ends? But the contents of this trunk would throw light on Somna's existence, and he was intensely anxious to know everything in connection with her.

"Art hungry—thirsty?" inquired Mother Sabeth.

"More thirsty than anything else, my dear Mother Sabeth," he replied. "But no doubt you wish . . . Don't get up—I will get you what you need and will drink some water myself, if I may."

He went to fetch the calabash that was kept in a deep hole in the ground, and filled two shells with clear water.

"Very good," said Mother Sabeth. "Thou wilt put in leaf of Somna," and she pointed to a little stool standing in the corner whereon some dry herbs were spread. Aaron gave her a handful of them and she rubbed them to fine powder. Mixing it with the water, she drank, with an effort. Then she straightened the mat on her couch and Aaron gently assisted her to lie on her back.

"Somna Tunga," she repeated apologetically. "Thou generous, help poor Mother Sabeth. But sleep come early—very tired. Pray thou with me. Get thou Holy Bible. Read thou."

Aaron took the aged and venerable book, sat on the mat, and opened the pages where an "ex libris" of yellow gelatine with a faded cross pointed out an oft-read passage. Some crosses had been marked in pencil on the margin, covered in finger-prints, and he began to read from the first mark. And whilst he read he became "funny all over" (as he thought later). He could feel the Christ of the Gospel enter the hut, stand behind him and say, "Blessed are ye that hunger now, for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now, for ye shall laugh."

The water that Aaron had gulped down caused his perspiration to flow freely in the dull heat; but he loved it; it fitted in with the new and strange sensations in his body and soul.

He read on and on, with a soft voice sinking almost to a whisper. Gradually his own sound died away, but still he read on intensely until the light began to fade under the beams of the hut. Every word was carved into his soul, to stand there for ever. The man whose life had been taken up entirely with himself became uneasy. He had never been in want of religious consolation, but now he imagined that he had always needed it and he felt that he had at last found it. He had discovered a great truth in Somna's saintly purity and unselfishness which harmonised entirely with the words of God, and all his feelings, his ambitions, his thirst for the exalted happiness of the soul, became linked with the Christian faith. He now felt sure that he had been converted when he had wandered for the first time in this Paradise island, and in his heart grew the impulse to go and tell others of his great find and to convert them, too.

Mother Sabeth had fallen asleep long ago. Aaron struck a match and lighted the little flickering lamp, ate a piece of the baked bread-fruit and drank more water. Then he gathered together the writings of the late missionary and began to study them carefully.

Presently he found himself involved in strange lives, living among strange characters. By degrees Somna's past life was revealed to him, and by degrees he became a staunch friend of her father, the late Rev. Frank Lewis. He went through several bundles of letters strung together and docketed as follows: "Mother's letters" (the largest lot); "Father's letters" (the smallest); "Business" (also of small size); "Friends and Colleagues" (rather bulky). There were two odd letters, one addressed to "Mrs. Lewis, The Pines, Golder's Gardens, London, N.E."; the other to "The Right Rev. the Bishop Stanton, D.D., 18, Blackfriars Place, London"; both signed by Somna's late father.

His letters copied into the copy-book were written in a hasty, but genial writing, and revealed a man who had suffered much because he was moulded of different clay from others. Mr. Lewis had joined a great foreign mission with ideas of his own, but had never realised any of them, because he had been too human.

Aaron became intimately acquainted with his character as the hours went by.

"Poor old fellow," he said to himself again and again. "I wish I had been in time for you. You were just the sort of fellow I should have liked for a friend."

Aaron had at last found a friend, but a dead one, who had left to him nothing but a mass of rustling papers, among which his spirit seemed to live. But some day the dry pages would rot or be burned. And then from among their ashes Frank Lewis would evaporate for ever, and be utterly forgotten.

Among "Mother's letters" Aaron dug about for a long time. At last he began to wish he knew her, and scanned the photograph album to find the face of the woman who could have written such letters. He naturally chose the kindest-looking one, above which the soft grey hair was parted and waved sideways over the ears with religious care. The eyes were dreamy, the mouth and nose came forward a little in warm-hearted gentleness. After long scrutiny Aaron thought that there might be a slight resemblance between her and a tame rabbit.

The letters which mattered, which showed something of Mr. Lewis's past, were as follows:

"MY DARLING SON,—

"I am loyal to you, and of course believe you. I cannot say how much I suffer with you. Your father never speaks about it; but, Frank darling, on his account you should reconsider your decision, and think twice before you marry her. However, if you feel you must, I shall love you just the same, and hope to see you and my new daughter at home one day. Only I can feel what you must suffer on account of your colleagues. But I pray to God that He may guide you and be with you, and take away their prejudices."

All her letters began with "My darling Son," and ended with "Your ever-loving Mother."

Passages from another letter, written years after the first one, read:

"I wish I could come and see you. I think it is horrid

of them" (probably meaning his fellow-missionaries) "to ignore you. I shall never forgive them for not marrying you to your wife. I pray for you, my darling, day and night; and feel so happy about my little granddaughter. She must be a perfect darling, as you describe her. I pray for your wife. If she is really suffering, don't you think you had perhaps better take her to a better climate? My heart is so full of sorrows, but God gives me new strength every day. Those who love Him most He chastises most. His punishment must be borne with unflinching faith."

In a later letter, she wrote:

"Yes, you go to New Zealand. In the end I will succeed in going out there with father. We will all join there, and be happy at last. I'm so longing to see you all, and pray that God will let us be reunited soon."

The letters of Mrs. Lewis were generally very long, telling minutely, and with motherly patience, all the days' events. There were long rigmaroles of profuse mother-love cropping up erratically and repeated over and over again—sometimes strung together for a whole page. As Aaron read, he wondered at the perseverance and steadfast logic of a mother's heart. He began to love the writer by degrees, and loved her more and more the closer his acquaintance with her became. An important passage in one of her last letters was:

"Cable when you arrive in New Zealand, and we will start off to come to see you."

Poor Mrs. Lewis! She had never received her cable, she had never started off. Probably she was now still at "The Pines," all dressed in black, with a black bonnet, knitting stockings, and now and then crying over her lost boy, and going on knitting until a sudden cold would perhaps fetch her home, and reunite her for ever with her beloved son.

"Father's letters" were all short, yet not wanting either in logic, in sentiment, or in rigmarole.

An early one said:

"MY DEAR SON,—

"Please don't make a fool of yourself; how any one can fall in love with a native woman, is to me incomprehen-

sible. You had better come home before it is too late."

It was apparent that those stern kicks from the paternal heart, mixed with the profuse understanding that only mothers possess, must have acted like poison and antidote upon the suffering son. It was clear that Mr. and Mrs. Lewis must have been at loggerheads over their son's behaviour. The son's letters proved that, even at a distance of many thousands of miles, the maternal spirit had been far more welcome to him than the kicks of the father, very Christian, but nevertheless vicious, and always touching a sore spot.

One of Mr. Lewis's letters said:

"My boy, you are going to hell on the quickest possible road." . . .

Whereas a letter from his mother (enclosed in the same envelope) read:

"What you have done is no sin, and the Almighty God will receive you and your wife before His altar in spite of your brethren out there refusing to share your company any longer."

No doubt young Mr. Lewis had had a strong mind of his own, and, as Aaron could see from the letters labelled "Business," and "Friends and Colleagues," he had also had a hard head.

He had lived for years in Tahiti with two men, the Rev. Mr. Bourgeois and the Rev. Mr. Selby. These two gentlemen, who were both married to Englishwomen, seemed to have dwelt in perfect harmony together. Mr. Bourgeois's letters, beginning with "Dear Brother Lewis," and, at a later stage, with "Dear Lewis," and, still later, with "Dear Mr. Lewis," showed that he was in authority in Tahiti, whether by age, privilege, or knowledge, Aaron could not make out.

One of his letters said:

"DEAR BROTHER LEWIS,—

"I will come over and see you at your station, but I can tell you straight away that both my principles and my religion oblige me to warn you sternly against taking such a step. Marriage between you and a native woman is impracticable, and you must sacrifice the idea to the great purpose for which

you stand in the service of the M.S." (Missionary Society.) "Neither I nor Selby could undertake to marry you."

And a postscript to the same letter said: "Why don't you get leave from the Bishop and go to England to get a wife?"

Aaron smiled very grimly on reading this.

"Get a wife," he thought, "just like going to a cattle market, and the rev. gentleman was married himself. What knowledge of human nature he must have possessed!"

Aaron thought he knew more about man's soul himself.

According to the copy of the letter preserved in his copy-book, Frank Lewis had answered as follows:

"DEAR BOURGEOIS,—

"You talk of sacrifice. Do you know what it means? I have loved Elizabeth ever since I converted her and baptised her, and I am indeed upset that you and Selby refuse to marry me. Elizabeth is a Christian woman and deserves to be regarded as such."

The P.S. of Brother Bourgeois's letter he had ignored.

In a later letter from Bourgeois, beginning "Dear Lewis," there were passages like this:

"We both regret your action; it casts on our minds a doubt of your faith in the Almighty God, and we are awaiting the judgment of the Bishop before letting you know our own decision. I must say, however, that you can hardly be considered a fit person to preach the gospel to the heathen. Your heart has changed."

Poor Frank Lewis was already judged; he had broken loose from his brethren.

The correspondence of Mr. Selby was very much in the same style, although perhaps at one time he had tried to be a friend to Lewis in his dilemma. A passage in one of his letters read:

"What does it really matter, so long as you change your mind? Why don't you go home on the steamer *Albion* and forget all about Elizabeth? Believe me, we are married men and have experience in matrimonial matters. . . ."

"And probably knew all about it," thought Aaron. "Why shouldn't Elizabeth—that was her name—of course, I know—

Sabeth, Mother Sabeth'—Aaron laughed for a moment—"be as good as any of your wives? Look at her offspring, Somna—doesn't that show it? I bet when you two gents turned home to England you did have some white-livered kids to take with you! None of you brethren has got a Somna."

The correspondence between Frank Lewis and the Reverends Bourgeois and Selby grew more compact, more definite and poignant as time went on.

One letter from Bourgeois said:

"DEAR SIR,—

"I must ask you not to call here again. Our ways lie apart. You have chosen your own."

The answer of Frank Lewis was:

"DEAR BOURGEOIS,—

"I only came to tell you that a little daughter was born to Elizabeth a week ago, and I wanted to ask you to christen her. But you treat me like a tramp. I call it un-Christian of you; any one of my own natives would say the same."

The letter was ignored. Probably good Mr. Bourgeois smoked it in his pipe.

Some time afterwards, Frank Lewis had copied a letter to his mother.

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—

"I am getting desperate here. Elizabeth is no better and needs a change of climate. Somna is growing into quite a big girlie, and I've been thinking several times of going away with them. Selby's wife died the other day. That's the second death in his family; he lost a little daughter a year ago, you will remember. I wrote him a letter of condolence, and tried to bring about a re-union, but he did not even answer my letter. My boy told me he tore it up without reading it. It makes me almost despair of Christianity. But when I look upon my work, my own converted natives, their devotion to me, I feel courageous again. We are now building a chapel of our own. Fisher, the manager of a trading house here, has been very kind to us and is providing us with lots of things necessary for building. . . ."

At that time the split between the three brethren had certainly become complete, and Lewis was missionarying off his own bat. Aaron felt irritated with him. He thought him weak during the crisis through which he had passed. Had he been Lewis, he would have punched his colleagues' heads off and written such a letter to the Bishop! He was almost longing for such a chance.

He read on.

Bit by bit the tragedy increased.

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—

"My heart is slowly breaking. They have sent a native Vicar among my natives, who makes propaganda for them. He has an evil tongue and my dearest ones have begun to taboo me. They go out of my way, and when I preach in the village on Sundays they don't come to listen to me any longer. Elizabeth is not getting any better. She has a complicated illness. Somna, dear little baby, is my only God-sent consolation."

The last letter written by Lewis from Tahiti was as follows:

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—

"I've given it up. Nobody speaks to me except Fisher. My health is breaking up. I've had enough of it here. I've booked up with one of Fisher's schooners. (Fisher is the only nice man on the island, but unfortunately he drinks immoderately.) I want to get away to Australia, and from there I'll sail to New Zealand. Will you and father join me there? I will take up another profession."

His letter was the desperate cry of a broken spirit. His mother and his little family were all that was left to poor Frank Lewis.

And after that he had embarked, been shipwrecked, come to the island, built this hut, lived here for some years cast out from the world. He must have lost all faith in humanity. Did he still believe in God?

The two letters, to Mrs. Lewis and to the Right Reverend the Bishop Stanton, D.D., were now in Aaron's hand. Both

were ready for despatch. Had Lewis written them on the chance of their reaching their destination?

The letter to the Bishop was as follows:

"MY LORD BISHOP,—

"I don't know you, but I've worked for you, or, strictly speaking, under you for God's Kingdom. Your disfavour has fallen upon me because some years ago I married a native Princess. I cannot believe that God loves me any the less for what I have done, although He has cast me out on a lonely island in the Pacific Ocean, whence, in all probability, this letter may never reach you. But if it does, I beg you to remember that you have done a wrong for which I am atoning. I am nearing the end of my days on this world, but before I leave it I must protest bitterly against the system at present applied to carry out the commands of Christ in your church.

"Believe me, God cares little whether you are a bishop or a humble-minded missionary, whether your wife looks black or white, so long as you believe in Him.

"I remain,

"Your sincerely,

"FRANK LEWIS."

The last letter written to Mrs. Lewis was in trembling handwriting:

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—

"Are you alive still, or have you died of sorrow and anguish about your child, your only Frank? I hope you are in heaven, which is the only place for you. I shall soon have done with this world. I know that. My life has been shipwrecked. My tears flow on the bosom of Elizabeth, who is suffering in body and mind. She often cries with me and my little Somna sits still and stares at us. I go mad to think of it. For days I have been unable to move. I've got fever, and cannot climb the mountain where I burn my signal fire; and perhaps a ship will pass and not even see us. Our last chance is lost. We seem condemned by God. . . ."

Then came a space in the letter, indicating the lapse of

time, and after that it went on in more uncertain handwriting.

"Mother,—I've begun to hate churches, chapels, bishops and all. A man can go to his God bravely without them. I will prove it myself. Yesterday I felt a trifle better, although the pain will never cease. Just think . . . I've been digging my own grave a hundred yards away from our hut. My poor wife and little daughter watched me, and looked so awful as I got deeper and deeper down into the ground, that I almost felt as if they were the spirits of the dead who had come to greet me. I told them that when I ceased to live they must place me on a mat and drag me over to the hole and gently drop me into it. They are to say the Lord's Prayer, and then cover me up with earth. They behave wonderfully, especially Somna. I cry much more than they do. Somna, little as she is, has a strong head, and God Almighty seems to take special care of her. I have taught them to make the sign of the cross whenever assailed by darkness or fear. I hate parting from them, but death means nothing more."

Aaron stopped reading. Death seemed to engulf him. All the time he could hear Mother Sabeth's quick breathing, which had an uncanny whistle in it. At last he resumed the reading of the tragic and miserable document of this sufferer, who had the light of God within him, a light which had flared up for the last time while he was writing it.

"When I have gone from all this, they will be left alone. Elizabeth will follow me soon, I think. But what will happen to Somna? I've put my sacred trust in the child. There are natives living on this desolate island, among whom I have worked without success. What will happen to my child? I talk to God and ask Him. But what will a woman do alone—here? I have taught her all that is good, and when I close my eyes for ever I know that she will be as good as a human being can. And the will of God Almighty will be done. 'There is none good but one, that is God.'"

Here the letter ended.

Had Lewis died soon afterwards?

Aaron covered his eyes. "What am I?" he asked himself. "What am I?"

* * * * *

The moon was high up. Midnight had passed. Mother Sabeth was asleep.

Soft footsteps sounded.

Somna entered the hut; Somna, of whom he had thought day and night. She beckoned to Aaron to be silent.

He arose, left the letters and books, and went out into the open on tip-toe.

She followed him.

The island looked like fairy-land, enveloped in the silvery light of the crescent. Aaron, at Somna's re-appearance, had lost all his nerve, and he now shook from head to foot. His teeth chattered when he spoke.

"Somna, dear Somna—why, you look ill—whatever is the matter?"

She was wrapped in a thick cloak. Her features were haggard. She seemed to be suffering.

"Are you not surprised to see me?" continued Aaron.

She breathed a deep sigh.

"No, great white man. I saw thee arrive with the sun."

"But you were in Tunga——"

"Jehovah told poor humble Somna of thy arrival."

"Wonderful! And did you hasten here to see me?"

"No, I come to Mother Sabeth. The poor souls of darkness do not yet know Jehovah; but I do not despair." Her voice had become deeper, sadder. "I will go again to Tunga."

"What has happened to you?" inquired Aaron, with intense anxiety.

"Wait thou, and come with me when I am well. Great work is to be done. I followed thy counsel and have made Tunga work, building house for Jehovah."

"I will come with you—I will, I will," said Aaron fiercely. "Somna, dearest Somna, I have travelled thousands of miles since I last saw you, but I could not find God where you were not. Now I have returned to you, and I will stay with you until I have found God again and for ever. I will help you. I must. I will build my house here, and I will go to Tunga with you and teach the great God's words. And I will be good—I will. The world is nothing without the great happiness of God. Let me stay here, let me be your help.

Let me forget the world and all its vileness; but let me find myself and be a true scholar of you and of God."

In a sudden access of passion he kneeled down and taking her hand placed it on his head.

"Give me your blessing, you saint—now, before I start. Let your purity go into my body and sweep out all the wickedness. I believe in you. Bless me."

Somna left her hand where he had placed it, and pressed it gently on his hair. Through all her sorrows shot a lightning of happiness.

"I thank God," she said. "I have prayed to Jehovah for thy return, thy powerful help, thou knowing great white man. Thy heart is torn and storm passes thy soul, but peace is in God, peace comes to thy heart. But do not call Somna saint, only poor servant of Jesus Christ. Wilt thou say the prayer?"

Aaron became confused. He did not know any prayers except parts of the Lord's Prayer. But he pressed his folded hands to his forehead and faith came into him and poured through him like an icy flow of crystal liquid.

After a long while Somna took away her hand.

"Very tired is the flesh," she said. "Let thou Somna go to rest."

Aaron got up quickly.

"Of course," he said, "you must go and sleep. Good night."

Somna went to the hut. Her soft, energetic steps seemed uncertain and her tall, beautiful figure swayed slightly. Aaron gazed after her, and when she had disappeared he looked up to the millions of stars and flung out his arms towards them.

"You distant stars!" he cried in his soul, "and you deep ocean! God is great and you are His servants. And I must go and tell the world of the great wonder that has happened to me. Henceforth my past self will be a stranger to me; henceforth I will follow the path that leads to God. And Somna will be my help, my guide."

Long before dawn Aaron pulled himself up and looked into the hut. Mother Sabeth was awake and stared into the dusk under the roof. Somna slept. Her face was turned towards the room and it seemed lustrous from a secret light. Her long black hair was undone and flowed around her body, which was covered by a cloak, for the air was chilly at dawn.

Aaron gathered together all the letters, folded them into packets, and stowed them away in the trunk.

Then he went to Mother Sabeth, who had a violent fright when he bent over her, and said:

"Mother Sabeth, I must go, but I will return. Will you tell Somna?"

"Blessed Jehovah," she answered. "Somna sick, very sick."

"Is she?" Aaron looked anxious.

"Somna told me, but she now asleep. But return thou. I will tell Somna."

Aaron went out of the hut and made at once for the beach, passing through the thick woods. There, under the great trees, the air was warm and stagnant. The chill of morning did not penetrate their thick growth.

An hour after sunrise, he stood by the side of his whaler, and looked at the *Amadea*, moored not more than a hundred yards away.

"Phillips has manœuvred her very well," he thought, and then he noticed that there was life aboard. Soon afterwards he saw three men coming along in a boat. They sang out for him.

They came ashore.

"'Morning. How are you going to get all the stuff on land?" asked Aaron.

"What about the natives?" inquired Phillips.

"They're on the other side of the mountain."

Phillips scratched his head.

"It'll be a long job," he said. "How far shall we have to carry the stuff?"

"I should think about six miles, through the woods."

"Blimy! that'll want some doing."

"We've got time, if it takes us a couple of months to build a bungalow."

"But where?"

"I'll show you," said Aaron. "I'll mark the trees on the road, so you can all find your way. Get the stuff ashore first, then we'll begin to carry it all off and take it in turns. Mind you don't forget the medicine chest and the book; those come first."

A little while afterwards all the crew came ashore carrying bags, boxes and baskets. They stood still before West, awaiting his orders, but not over-anxious to receive them. Aaron cleared his throat once or twice, spat into an eddy of the lagoon water and said:

"Men, while you are here on my island I wish you to observe certain regulations. I do not restrict your liberties, apart from the work you are to do and are being paid for, but I must now ask you to conduct yourselves in a moral and Christian way. Every one of you has been to some school, so you all know what that means. I want your behaviour to be exemplary and wish you never to forget that we are all rotten sinners and that it is our duty to become better. There is a God above us, as true as I am talking to you."

That said, the crew almost fainted, except Phillips, who immediately showed contradiction, and a wish to argue.

"Good Mr. West," he said interrogatively, with eyes starting out of their sockets, "are you goin' to be a blinkin' churchified chapel priest? I've heard you say some nice things afore now."

"Quite," said Aaron coolly, "and I don't say I shall never say anything nice again. But I will try my best not to. There's no one good but one, that is God."

"Then are you goin' to be a blinkin' missionary?"

"Yes," said Aaron.

"And what qualification have you to be that?" asked Phillips.

"None."

Phillips laughed, but Aaron's face looked so stern and martial that his laugh froze to submissive acquiescence.

"Well," he said, "it is no business of mine, good Mr. West, what you do. We all like yer well enough, and if you're serious about that God above us, I'm with you. And if any one sez anythin' against 'im, God 'elp 'im."

"There are things which we don't know and can only feel," said Aaron. "Now then, there are two Christian ladies living on this island, the wife and daughter of a London missionary. They look up to us as civilised white men, and we must be what they think we are. Not only must we fake to be good, but *be* good, or become good, in reality. We must become Christian gentlemen, and honestly try to be kind, generous and unselfish. Of course I do not expect you to become saints all at once."

This second address, especially the latter part of it, sent the crew into a fit of laughter, in which Aaron joined heartily.

Then they all looked utterly astonished.

"Two Christian ladies?" they asked in a chorus.

"An old lady and a young lady," explained Aaron. "Mrs. Lewis and Miss Lewis. They were cast on this island many years ago in a shipwreck. Mr. Lewis died since, and now they are all alone. It is only natural that by now the two ladies should have their own conventionality, which may seem strange to you. But nevertheless I wish you to observe the most gentlemanly demeanour if you should come in contact with them, and treat them as you would treat English ladies. And now no more questions about it. That's all."

"Are there any native ladies?" inquired Phillips, as spokesman for the others.

"Yes, there are. You will see the natives in the course of time. But there's to be no intercourse except on conventional lines."

Phillips scratched his head.

"All right, Mr. West," he said. "I suppose we are allowed to find out the rest for ourselves."

"You may," replied Aaron, "and now let's shake hands on decent behaviour."

There was a general hand-shaking, a sort of "pass it on." Then the mate said:

"I'll b—— well be as good as b—— gold for ever after, Mr. West."

"That's a wrong start," replied Aaron. "Do it, and don't have such a lot to say about it." Then he paused, and there was a momentary silence. "There are things which we don't know and can only feel," he said at last. "And now let us start."

The work on the island began in the terrible heat of the sun, in air that never stirred. It seemed incredible that the prolific vegetation was not burned to cinders in the fierce glare.

Even the birds were quiet. The elegant fans of the palms looked like exquisite satin tapestry in their silence. If only the trades could have reached this part of the island and cleared away the stagnation! But they could not. The mountain forbade it.

At mid-day, Aaron was again with Somna.

She was sitting on her low bed, and he could see that she was haggard. Her lovely hands and nails were torn and battered, and she had a large bruise on her neck.

"Whatever is that?" inquired Aaron. "Who has bruised you, Somna?"

"Tenania, black child," she replied. "The enemy of Jehovah."

She put her hand on the bruise, and Aaron saw that it caused her pain.

"Let me see." He looked closely at the bruise.

"Good gracious, Somna, that blow might have killed you! Doesn't it hurt you frightfully? And you have walked here through the night, all the way from Tunga!" He looked at her with admiration. "I shall have to bring Tenania to justice for this," he added.

"No," she said. "Thou shalt not take vengeance."

Aaron knelt down before her and opened the medicine box. He then saw that her bare feet were covered with blood, and he fetched the calabash of water and washed her sores and cuts, until they looked pink and clean.

"That will make you feel easier," he murmured, whilst she looked at him in astonishment and suffered him to do as

he liked. He rubbed sweet-smelling ointment and powder on her feet and hands and neck. Boracic, arnica, and carbolic filled the air. Then he bandaged her; awkwardly, yet quite well enough to make her comfortable.

"Now, lie down," he said, "and rest your body. Do not trouble about anything. I shall remain here and look after you and Mother Sabeth. I shall begin to build a house not far away from here, so do not be disturbed if you hear the sound of hammer blows."

"Thou great generous man," said Somna. "Thou fillest poor ignorant Somna with gratitude."

"You are not ignorant," replied Aaron. "You know more than I do, and you shall teach me."

Then he left the hut, and was so happy to have a patient that he began to whistle a tune. He felt deep satisfaction in his heart. Tunga, Tenania, everything could wait now until she had recovered from her sores. He was almost thankful that she had them, so that he might take care of her, and restore her to her former health and beauty. Yet he was secretly anxious to learn all about Tunga. Poor Somna! She must have gone through hard times; but now, at any rate, he was here, and he would help her.

Phillips and the crew had, at Aaron's command, been waiting at some distance, and they talked in whispers about the strange and sudden changed behaviour of Mr. West.

"'E's gone potty in the 'ead," suggested the mate.

"Shut up," said Phillips. "'E knows what 'e's after."

"Well, 'e ain't goin' to impose on me with 'is missioneerin'," replied the mate.

"Shut your row," said Phillips. "'E knows what 'e's after an' means what 'e says."

"Now then, Phillips," said Aaron, coming close to the group of men. "Let's see about the place for building. We don't want to build too near to that hut where two women are ailing."

He walked a couple of hundred yards or so further on and the crew followed their leader in expectation and silence.

"There—how will that do?"

Phillips looked round like a regular connoisseur and after a while said, "Yes."

"Well, let's get the things up here first before we actually begin," said Aaron. "We can all help each other and do two journeys to the *Amadea* every day. When my house is finished I'll allot you some fine ground round the other side of the island and you can build yourself a bungalow there, near the *Amadea*. She'll have to be kept in trim all the time. I might want to use her at any minute."

"Very well, good Mr. West," replied Phillips. "But don't forget the casks and the 'baccar."

"You shall have all you need to be happy, but work must be done," replied Aaron.

He began to mark out a flat piece of ground for his bungalow whence he could look over the little vale and see the hut under the bread-fruit trees. The place was shady, protected by groves of lovely palms all round.

"We'll cut down the nearest timber, strip it and soak it in tar, cut the poles to equal lengths—that's the way to begin a bungalow."

"Better get the rafters soaked in water first," suggested Phillips. "But what about the roofing? None of us knows nothing abaht thatching."

"The natives do—you'll see," replied Aaron.

"You will have a decent sort of a kitchen, sir?" insinuated Ben Philpot, coming a step forward.

"What for? You ain't goin' to 'ave a lot of steaks an' chops 'ere," said Phillips.

"Sir?" insisted Philpot, ignoring Phillips.

Aaron smiled at him, but thought it better to say nothing just then. He did not know yet whether he would want Philpot as a servant or not.

"Well, let's get on with it," he said. "I'll help."

Half-way between the bungalow site and the little hut was a wooden cross sticking in the soil. There was the grave of the Rev. Frank Lewis. Over this cross Aaron would have to look every time he wished to see the hut, and over it his mind would sweep back into another man's past and he would be reminded that there was an unfulfilled mission, a task that

had been begun, but had been wrecked by human will and shortsightedness.

In his ecstatic mood, which drove him to translate into action immediately his novel sensations and his sudden faith in divine greatness and Christian religion, he did not heed what the little cross meant. Nor did he yet understand the terrible allegory of the Saviour who was made to carry His own cross. But crosses, small or large, lie on every one's back; they have different weights, but even the smallest of them tires its bearer when carried for a long distance.

When divine faith had overcome Aaron, a cross was imposed on him. It made him feel happy and easy now, but little could he guess what it would be like in a year, or two or three or ten years' time.

* * * * *

The astonishment of the crew was dramatic when Aaron introduced them to the two Christian ladies. They stood staring silently from Somna to Mother Sabeth and from Mother Sabeth to Mr. West, who made one of his short speeches pointing out to them the urgency of kindness and respect due to the two suffering women.

In their hearts they all agreed with him, especially about Somna, to whom they all showed immediate respect. Her quiet eyes seemed to penetrate to the remoteness of their rough hearts and there to touch a strange cord of sympathy. Her kind broken words in English, her radiating purity and divine faith, threw the men into a whispering conversation when they left the hut. They all thought of their mothers, wives, sweethearts and other womenfolk they knew at home, and a controversy began among them as to which of their women was the most like Miss Lewis in body and soul.

Somna's influence over the men was not a passing one. They thought of and spoke about her every day, and when they saw her walking at a distance, they dropped their tools and high-sea talk and looked towards her with reverent eyes.

"She's the best I've ever seen," Phillips would say.

"Now I know all about Mr. West and his missionneering," Philpot would add.

"She ain't half pretty, but stale, like all them god-like kids," the mate would retort.

* * * * *

The presence of white faces changed everything on the island, and a hundred strange noises coming from the distance, and made by seven civilised men building a bungalow, penetrated into the silence of the humble hut.

A new life began to dawn for Somna. Her bruises and cuts began to heal under Aaron's careful nursing. He went to see her six or eight times a day, and with angelic patience kept on washing and bandaging his lovely saint.

At times he studied long chapters on diseases, especially tuberculosis, in his medical volume, wishing with all his heart that he might be of service to poor old Mother Sabeth. But he could make neither head nor tail of her complicated illness. Her case had gained a great advantage over his powers of healing, inasmuch as it had existed long before he came into contact with it. Grasping the fact, however, that the disease was caused by some ravaging bacilli, he resolved to send after these dangerous carriers of destruction something stronger and swifter than the bacilli themselves, in order to catch them and overcome them. So he began to administer to Mother Sabeth small quantities of aconite, belladonna, phenacetin and opium from his medicine chest. But when he saw that his ministrations only increased her sickness, and caused a cold sweat to break out all over her dry body, he knocked off his remedies, and returned to Somna's dry herbs, which meanwhile he had tried on himself with disastrous results.

Presently Aaron introduced condensed milk into the diet of his patients. He possessed great quantities of it, and both Mother Sabeth and Somna thoroughly appreciated the innovation. Furthermore, Somna was ordered six days' complete rest by her doctor; and Mother Sabeth more air, for which purpose Aaron had a small square window cut in the wall of the hut just over her head, to keep her well aired. Thus the two women ailed along, one on a rapid upward path, the other on a slow but certain decline.

In the meantime, quantities of all kinds of materials were carried on the backs of sweating men from the *Amadea* through the stuffy forests to the building site. Aaron carried the heaviest of all the loads and sweated most, for his spirit drove him on furiously, so great was his desire to see the house spring up from the ground and to take possession of it.

A weird mass of things stood about in the shadow of the cocoa-palms, ready to be moved into the house, the foundation stone of which was not yet laid. Aaron had been very busy in 'Frisco, buying and collecting all the things which make for civilised comfort. And in so doing he had shown a peculiar taste. There were, for instance, hard little stools, cane tables, cane chairs, a china cabinet with broken panes, a baby roll-top desk and a row of glossy oleographs. The latter exhibited all the tragedies possible on the high seas: ships wrecking in storm, ships burning, ships sinking. The few caricatures of sailors among them were indeed necessary to relieve these nautical agonies.

During the time of transportation, Aaron lived in a small tent pitched close to his belongings. He had made arrangements for the crew to sleep aboard ship. And there, during the long hours of the still night on the lagoon, the rum cask went round and round among Aaron's first converts with ceaseless energy.

Last, but not least of all the loads to be carried through the glare of the sun, was a harmonium. It needed the entire crew, with an outfit of bars, ropes and other mechanical devices to carry it for even as much as a hundred yards at a time.

Aaron showed vicious determination during his last transportation.

"One—two—three—go!" he would shout, and all shoulders would give a lift. "Go onnnn, ugh!—don't hurry off with it, Phillips. Now then—once more—one, two, three—go! There she goes!"

Then came a continuous groaning, sighing and grunting from seven burly men. Twigs, brambles and roots cracked under their feet; holes were discovered where nobody sus-

pected them; swear-words were holloaed through the serene silence of the tropical forest, and Aaron would grunt:

"Once more! Now then—remember, the Egyptians had to carry their stones a thousand miles to build their pyramids."

"We ain't Egyptians," said Phillips.

After each stage there was a pause, when the men fell prostrate. As the stages increased, the pauses became longer. Finally Aaron looked upon the harmonium with intense hostility, and said to himself:

"What the dickens did you want to buy that thing for? Just because you saw it in a window and thought you could play—eh?"

But suddenly his musical instincts awoke and reminded him that when a boy he had learned to play a hymn or a song or two. He unlocked it and began to play to his already prostrate converts. And there arose through the forest of the Pacific island a multi-coloured squeal, mingled with the thuds of trampling bellows, sometimes harmonious, sometimes not, which made the birds of the wilderness flutter round in awe.

Aaron now thought he would raise the courage of his crew by a recital at each successive halt. But they soon became weary of the performance, and after a dozen short concerts, Aaron got tired of it, too.

At last, after a night's rest in the lonely forest, the harmonium got to the site of the bungalow.

Then Ben Philpot, who had had the butlership of Mr. West on his mind all the time, sprang a surprise by asking for the key, opening the instrument, and playing a right-down recognisable "God Save the King," to which he added a voice which suggested the noise given out by a tin saucepan when knocked with a hammer. Nevertheless, the men took off their hats and straightened their backs, for they all had British beef under their skins.

Aaron was quite swept away by this unexpected performance, and cried out in ecstasy:

"Now let it be known to all men that I call this place, this house and its vicinity, henceforth and for ever after—St. Felix."

The crew immediately cheered, and Ben Philpot, flushed with success, made another more determined effort to obtain the butlership, and burst into "A Life on the Ocean Wave."

When he had finished there was general applause, but Phillips said:

"Get off that blinkin' 'monium. Ye're more fit for a grinder."

Philpot, however, ignoring Phillips, addressed Mr. West.

"Sir—'ow is my play?"

He spread his legs apart, almost splitting with pride.

"Not so good as your pancakes, Philpot," said Aaron grimly.

"But I can play," insisted Philpot.

"When work's done," said Aaron curtly.

Ben Philpot said nothing, but he resolved to play and sing up for the butlership on some other occasion.

A moderate amount of red wine was then done away with, and no more work carried on for the rest of the day.

Chapter XVI

One morning Aaron visited Somna to inquire after her health, and she said:

"I feel much better and will begin work in Tunga."

"I came to thank you for letting me have all the books out of the trunk," replied Aaron.

He examined her neck, which was still sore, then continued:

"You cannot go to Tunga yet, not till you are quite well, and then I will come with you. Now, would you like my men to build a new house for you?"

"Thou must not take trouble with me. I am happy. No other house need."

"Well," replied Aaron, "I shall remain on the island for a long time. We will see what happens. Now, I have another request. I want to learn the native language. Will you teach me?"

Somna smiled and said:

"Very little know, but what I know thou shalt know."

"I shall be very grateful for all you can teach me."

Aaron threw himself vigorously into the study of her language. He wrote twenty English words at a time, then asked Somna for their equivalent in Polynesian, sat for hours twisting his tongue over them, and soon learned a long string of useful words.

Whilst trees were being felled and rafters cut for the construction of St. Felix, Aaron took the Rev. Lewis's books under his arms and went off to a lonely spot to read. Among them were: *A History of the World*; *Lives of English Bishops*; two *Romances* by Tolstoy; *The Age of Reason*; *The French Revolution*; *Quo Vadis*; *Hamlet*; *Essays* by Schopenhauer, and various books of poetry.

Thrown on his own resources, Aaron absorbed everything eagerly. Romance, adventure, love, pathos, drama, speculation, all passed through his mind with peculiar result. His eyes were opened to see more clearly the good and evil within himself and others. His longing to be only good became a regular craze, and at the same time he resolved to do away with all conflicts and doubts in his mind, to establish a firm basis of life, not merely a theory. He made a start by clearing away the relics of the religion of his early youth which could only hamper progress. Besides, he could not split up his God into a Trinity, because he decided that common-sense was against it. Nevertheless, he thought it worth while to consider it all a great deal, and finally went so far as to put down some of his thoughts on paper. When he saw them in black and white he could discern more clearly what appeared to be reasonable and what to be foolish. He was able to select and reject his own ideas as they flashed before him in writing.

Yet, in spite of all his faith in God, Aaron made no headway towards a basis, but kept on groping in darkness. He prayed a good deal for enlightenment, which was given him in so far as he was carried on and on more rapidly in his thoughts; and long sheets of paper were filled with his writings. Sometimes, however, he appeared strange and ridiculous to himself. After days spent in reading and writing he

discovered that these proceedings brought no solution to the enigmas of life.

"I want to do something with my faith," he said to himself. "But it's little help to me to know what others think and do. I am my own Aaron, and I'm hanged if I don't go on with him."

What other people thought or did only irritated him. He felt a violent impulse to contradict them, to call them fools, animals, and such things. He became distressed and strove harder than ever to find a rock of truth, an acceptable basis of life, good enough for himself, and therefore good enough for anybody.

His imagination was awake, and helped his mind to run away from the present into the future, sometimes right to the borders of eternity. But unfortunately it always came back to its owner and never brought with it the one thing: a truthful answer to the great riddle.

At times Aaron's behaviour was very strange, and his crew began to think that the heat was affecting his brain. Once when they had knocked off work in the evening to return to the *Amadea* and the rum casks, Aaron shouted after them:

"Good-bye, you lads! God bless you!"

"That's quaint," said Phillips.

"'E's begun 'is missioneerin'," added the mate.

"Shut up!" Phillips answered back. "'E's studyin' for 'is degree."

"'E's potty," insisted the mate. "See 'im sleep in the bungalow with no roof on it, usin' the 'monium for a dresser! Blimy!"

Now one day, after a sleepless night spent in thinking about the Trinity, the Holy Ghost, the holy meal, churches, bishops, and all their sheep and goats, Aaron came to the conclusion that he could not live among unsolved riddles any longer. He would have to get out of the muddle somehow. So he said to himself quite frankly:

"You haven't brains enough to allow them to get muddled, and you haven't time to think about metaphysics and philosophy with the brains you've got. Therefore, out of the

muddle before it is too late, or else you'll be a fool like many others."

He put his great arms behind his back, paced up and down behind his growing bungalow and whistled a tune. He looked at Phillips, who was sawing up rafters to make steps, and then a thermometer caught his attention. He stared at it, pulled out a red handkerchief and wiped his brow, and then suddenly he had the greatest idea of his life.

That thermometer! How suddenly it seemed to turn into something alive! At last! All the mysteries and God-knows-whats of life were before his eyes. Heat and cold, and a capillary tube that was the path of life; a bowl of mercury that represented humanity, working under constant pressure from its hungry bowels, fluctuating under the influences and changes of the vast atmosphere. Even the degrees were there, showing in figures all the states of human mind, all their longings, their capacities, their rise, their fall.

It was an inspiration! and it flashed through Aaron's mind in a fraction of a second.

He tore the thermometer from the wall and went off with it to ascend the mountain, recalling Moses of former days who had received from God some old-fashioned laws for the children enamoured of the golden calf.

Whilst he slowly strolled towards the great rocks, from time to time gazing absent-mindedly at the obelisk of basalt, the blue sky and the ocean, he was again assailed by doubts. The child-faith of yore made him feel picturesquely sentimental.

"Come on, come on!" he encouraged himself. "Those stories you heard from your mother and at school won't do for you any longer. You mustn't be caught crying again over the sufferings of Jesus. Other men have suffered similar torture. Who knows, you might suffer even worse yourself. Now you're a modern Christian, and there must be something reasonable in your religion. One day God may call you to teach others, and then you will have to know what you are talking about."

At last he flung himself down on his back in the shade of a rock and stared into space. Everything shrank into insignificance.

nificance except the sky and his own soul. The world became an infinitesimal spot, selfish, dirty. Yet, did not God live everywhere? On the great Pacific that hurled its sleepless rollers against the coral rocks; in the blue of the sky, in the depths of the mountain where the blood of the world pulsed through massive stone?

For an instant Aaron really did think that God penetrated everything and he became a raving pantheist. Wings had grown to his sick soul and carried it off from extreme to extreme. A felicitous strength filled him as wine does a drunkard, and if he had ever heard of Archimedes he would have cried out: *δός μοι ποῦ στῶ καὶ κινῶ τὰν γὰν*—(give me where to set foot and I move the world).

But there was a limit to human power, no lever long enough, no ground on which to stand. Instead, disillusion, mere theory, a superhuman riddle.

Aaron's mind returned to what appeared to be reality once more, and the drunken dream collapsed into a heap of unordered rubbish. What would happen now? He closed his eyes, covered his face with his cap, drew up his short legs and went on dreaming. Out from the ocean, the stones, the sky, the ether, the slumbering forests at his feet—out from the very furnace of the sun rose a wonderful white figure. A sublime melody enraptured his senses. Every ounce of strength seemed drained from his body and he listened with breathless expectation. The figure took shape, and said solemnly:

"There is no one good but one, that is God."

Was that Christ speaking?

Aaron peeped out from under his hat.

"No, it is Somna's voice," he said to himself.

He called to her, but she was not there. It was only an illusion, an hallucination. But had she perhaps projected herself? Had she come to call him to believe in her humble faith? No, she was but human. She could not pass through stone walls, walk on the billows of the sea and call up the dead from their stinking sleep.

Yet somebody had once been able to do all that, and Aaron

knew him: Christ Jesus, the great Saviour and sufferer whose life was eagerly preserved in the writings of the gospels.

He had also appeared in garments of white, spreading around Him the sacred perfume of purity. A million pictures of His attitudes, of incidents relating to His life, were hung on the walls of His children's houses, His churches, His palaces. Every inch of ground whereon His feet had stood was by them proclaimed holy; every piece of garment He had worn, every splinter from His cross (genuine or not), divinely sacred. His followers had added to His simple truths libraries of legends, dogmas, sophistries, and had produced an incredible phalanx of saintly human creatures, all dotted down in history as His most worthy disciples. Some upheld to this day that bread and wine, taken under special conditions, turn into His real flesh and blood; some denied it; others wished it was true. Did not Somna believe that Christ was the inspired Son of God?

Here Aaron's fierce meditations came to an abrupt end. He became sick of controversies. He wanted certainty, and his fighting blood rushed to the surface. He rose up, looked around him, and saw nothing but desolation. He was utterly alone. There was no one to fight but God Almighty himself, and Aaron set about to attack his Creator.

The arteries on his muscular neck swelled finger-thick, his brows ran together under his massive skull, and his high chest stood out, ready for the weightiest of sledge-hammers. He clenched his fists, holding the thermometer in one of them, and shook them towards heaven. He looked defiant, arrogant, savage, fanatical.

"You great God," he began to shout, "since I believe in your existence and all-presence, since I know that you are the only true God and Master of the Universe, send me, your slave, a message. I am a miserable sinner. I suppose you made me like that. But now I've done with sinning, I ask for your help. I have doubts. They cling to me like a ton weight of deep-sea weed, and I ask you to clear them away. Now, as the Father of all creatures alive and dead, I ask you—and in your justice you must tell me if it is so:—Was Jesus

Christ, born in year number one of our miserable civilisation, your absolute, real son, and did He walk about in human flesh?"

Aaron pressed his fists into his sides and licked his lips.

There was no answer.

"I ask you again, God—Father in Heaven."

He listened.

There was no sound except the gentle breath of the trades, that just kept on blowing, curling his thick hair. They carried off the evaporation of his burning skin and mingled it with the pregnant sweetness of vanilla.

"No answer," said Aaron, and he drew out his watch.

Then he cried to heaven again.

"By this mortal, civilised watch, that feasts on our lives—tell me, great Father in heaven—yes, or no. You have dined with Abraham. He had many wives. I've only got one! Am I not as good as he? Can't you say one word to me? You have sent Somna a vision, now send me one. Fair is fair. I'll give you five minutes."

Aaron seated himself cross-legged, and kept his watch in his palm, staring at the minute hand going round and round—tick, tick, tick. And nothing happened.

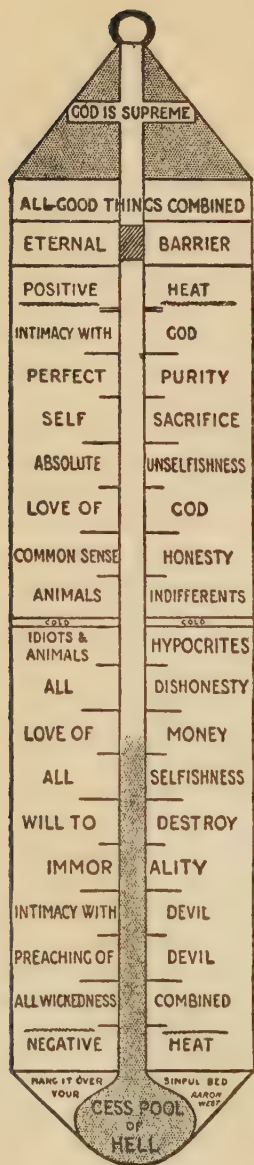
There was but one minute left, and he became frantic.

"One more minute, Great Almighty God," he shouted. "Send me your Holy Spirit. . . . Only thirty seconds more—twenty—ten. . . . Tell me the truth. . . . Done!"

He put his watch in his pocket, fell on his knees and folded his hands in prayer.

"Great Father in heaven—forgive your sinner for asking perhaps too much. But I take it from you that Jesus Christ was but a humble, mortal man, without sin, but of ordinary flesh and blood. He was great, His words are true. . . . Please let your divine Holy Spirit that lived in Him come to me also."

He remained in his devout attitude for some time and peace came to his tormented heart. He had found a basis of life, and was no longer troubled by things that seemed complicated and irrational. He took the silence of God as a negative answer, and the question of Trinity was settled,



as far as he was concerned. But he was far from putting himself on the same level with Christ. Jesus had been without sin, and that was more than he could say of himself.

But Somna rose still higher now, and became more pure, more good, unselfish, self-sacrificing in Aaron's eyes. She was on the pedestal of Christ, living beyond the eternal barrier where all perfect things and virtues are combined in intimacy with God. Christ had preached to lepers, thieves and murderers. Somna repeated his words in Tunga. And what were the people of Tunga but lepers, thieves and murderers?

In Somna's virtues and his own baseness Aaron had at last arrived at a measure for good and evil. He had found the right doctrine at last, and looked upon the thermometer with intense joy. Out came paper and pencil once more, and Aaron began to draw the thermometer that was to take the temperature of all humanity.

He lay on his chest, kicking out his short, fat legs behind, whilst he drew an allegory that was to be the foundation of a new, great religion: a modern, enlightened, stable basis of right and wrong. The sun scorched the back of the little fellow who had put Moses in the shade. But Aaron didn't notice it. He was intensely satisfied and became crazy to reveal his discovery to the wide world as soon as it should be ready.

He now set about to conquer the evils of the island with almost fanatical zest. He journeyed to and fro between St. Felix and Tunga and imposed a certain amount of order on the wild natives. Bara-toi, the usurper, he banished into the wilderness, and he put the two hundred and odd new souls, who had landed on the island during his absence, under the political leadership of Marva-rao. The latter appeared now to be a docile disciple of Aaron. The great chief, and a court of twelve elders attached to him, were invested by Aaron with minor powers to frame laws, and unite in council with him to discuss schemes for the building of houses, chapels, the organisation of fisheries and collection of copra.

Numberless wives had to be discarded by the native husbands; church-going became compulsory, and one day, during a fête organised by Aaron, Master Phillips was solemnly appointed comptroller of public morals and general sanitary inspector of the island, a dignity upon which the seamen from the beginning looked in the most formal way.

Tenania gracefully retired into the woods from this new and orderly community and associated herself with the out-cast King Bara-toi.

Aaron worked with almost superhuman determination on the emancipation of his island, and outwardly the Kingdom of God set up by him seemed to prosper.

Chapter XVII

Ten months had gone by.

One morning, Aaron, seated in the four-cornered sitting-room of his bungalow, roared out for Philpot, *maxima voce*.

"Here I am," said Philpot, running in, almost angrily. "What is it, sir?"

"I've had a look in the glass. My beard's getting too long. I want to have it shorter. Come on."

Philpot fetched scissors and comb.

"Let's get out on the verandah," said Aaron. "I don't want my hair all over the place."

"Right, sir."

And Philpot took out a cane chair and began to trim Mr. West's beard ruthlessly.

Aaron, looking sideways into a glass, interrupted him from time to time to direct the scissors.

"A little more off this side," he would say, or "Even out that staircase. To-morrow will be Sunday. I ought to go and hear Hezekiah preach. You'd better go, too. You need purification, Philpot."

Aaron's general servant hissed whilst he cut the beard, like a groom brushing down a horse, but he said nothing.

"Stop that hissing," commanded Aaron, and after a short pause, he added: "The Vicar been here?"

"Who—David?"

"Yes, of course. Where is he?"

"I suppose he's working over at New Chelsea in the store-house."

"But he generally comes on Saturday to read his sermon to me."

"I suppose he'll come again to-day." Philpot hissed quickly, but stopped at once. "What I wanted to say, Mr. West, is this. Do you mind if I go over to New Chelsea to church to-morrow? Tunga is such a long way off, and if Miss Lewis comes to have her tea with you in the evening, I shan't be back to make it."

Aaron looked at him intently for a moment. Then he said:

"Philpot, tell me the truth. What is it? You're always running to the settlement."

Philpot went away from Mr. West a pace or two, measuring the newly-cut beard with a critical eye and clipping the scissors nervously in the air.

"I—I—" he began. "I—met a nice young native girl. She's only seventeen, such a trump, Mr. West. Life is lonely on this island in spite of Christian doctrine, and I thought, perhaps, if you didn't mind, I might get married to her."

"Who is she?" inquired Aaron.

"Dorothy, the daughter of old Dan, the storehouse keeper. She's never been married before, and knows all about Jesus."

"Philpot!" said Aaron, shocked. "And only a few days

ago you took the liberty of telling me that Miss Lewis looked like your sweetheart."

"Yes, but you see, Mr. West, my sweetheart is an anthecist, one of them flippant young things that don't believe in a God. And Dorothy goes to chapel and sits in the first row, almost at the feet of the Vicar when he preaches. Oh, she's got such a nice little nose and eyes, and nice altogether!"

"Now, will you get on with my beard!" grunted Aaron. "I don't know what to say about it."

Philpot continued to cut the beard excitedly.

"Well," he retorted, "there's Master Phillips, he's got a wife! There's Mate Sanders, he's got a wife. There's Dale, Jones, Humphreys, McKay! They've all got wives and little bungalows and are happy."

Aaron had nothing to say to that. He knew it already. He could not have stopped his disciples from picking up their wives, however hard he had tried.

When his beard had been reduced by at least fifty per cent., he got up from the cane chair and said to Philpot:

"I've thought it over. If you want to be like the others, and haven't got enough conscience to prevent you from sinning, you'd better get married to Dorothy at once. But of course you will have to go to New Chelsea and build yourself a bungalow there and work in the storehouse. In this house I couldn't put you up with a wife."

Philpot went away, looking very sad, but resolved to marry Dorothy very quickly, and very much on the quiet.

Aaron strolled up and down the verandah and looked across the vale from time to time, over the grave of Mr. Lewis, and fastened his eyes on the little hut under the bread-fruit trees.

Somna and Mother Sabeth still lived there; they seemed to reverence every beam of their miserable dwelling, and only with the utmost persuasion had Aaron succeeded in having the little hut thoroughly renovated, and in adding comforts which he thought indispensable to a woman so ill as Mother Sabeth. He had tried to show Somna how dangerous it was for her own health to be living constantly in the same room with her mother, but she would not hear of

going elsewhere. The care of her mother was to her a sacred duty to which she clung tenaciously and with endless self-sacrifice. She herself was now in splendid health again, and seemed happier than she had ever been before, and every hour of the day she thanked God for sending the great white man to her.

Her mind progressed rapidly. Her knowledge of English quickly improved, whilst Aaron still lagged far behind in his study of the Polynesian lingo. They both worked hand in hand, and all questions of importance dealing with the religious, moral and social reforms of the island were considered seriously between them. Aaron proved himself a capable, business-like organiser, a remarkably clever master of suggestions and solver of riddles; whereas Somna was never wanting in humility, dignity and kindness. She was endowed with a deep understanding of the feelings and longings of the natives which surpassed Aaron's comprehension. He had become a ruler of men and women, a good little man who held up his finger at trespassers, and at times threatened them—with the rod behind his back. Somna was the ruler of hearts, possessed of unlimited kindness and forbearance, who looked long and often into the many dark souls, and raised them up from their blackness, if only momentarily, by the purity and goodness that poured from her soul like a happy fountain of eternal water. Her beauty was indescribable. The long cloak that now enveloped her did not hide, but only accentuated her physical powers and perfect shape.

Aaron perceived it, but manfully fought the little flames of passion that at times burned in his soul. He exerted all his will to blind himself to her beauty, and tried to succeed in forgetting that Somna was a woman. His daily intercourse with her was naturally intimate, and their friendship was growing continually.

Very often she came to see him at his bungalow, in the room that was known as "the office." There they would sit opposite to each other at a long, rough deal table, and chat or seriously discuss and conclude many matters of importance.

Somna paid high respect to Aaron's suggestions, but she

was not afraid to utter her own opinion, and he soon found out that she was wiser and stronger even than he had thought at first.

Their plans decided on, Aaron brought them into shape on paper; he brooded over them, and later on passed them out of the office in the form of "Regulations as to so-and-so," or "For general knowledge," or "By the will of God." His disciples had posts of management or instruction assigned to them in the various offices, which Aaron called "departments," and all matters were thoroughly thrashed out with the respective managers of the departments to which they referred. The various pigeon-holes in Aaron's little roll-top desk were labelled as follows:

"Thermometer," "Church, Chapel, etc.," "Warehouse," "Tunga," "New Chelsea," "Stocktaking."

He also kept a salary book where endless pay-lists lined the pages. There was no actual money for payment, and if there had been, a sovereign wasn't worth a penny on the island at that time. There was also the store-book, in which every native, Christian or Pagan, who worked on the island had a page headed by his name, showing the quantity of copra collected by him and delivered dry at the warehouse. Large sums stood to the credit of the natives, and though no money had been paid out to them, still they went on working and seemed to like work. From time to time Aaron would issue a report through a departmental chief, or ask Hezekiah Marva-rao or David to announce publicly in church that all work done was noted in a great book, and that soon he would sail to 'Frisco and purchase stores of all kinds, which he would bring back on a chartered ship, and distribute among the people in accordance with, and in proportion to, the money earned and then standing in their favour.

A second storehouse had been erected at Tunga, run much on the same lines as the one in New Chelsea, of which Hezekiah Marva-rao was the manager. He had gone through a double school in the meantime—Aaron's and Somna's, and he was now apparently a stern, simple preacher who, still a king by rank, ruled Tunga on the principles of kindness and the gospels. He had sent away all his wives except the young-

est, a shapely and sensitive creature. But he broke his own vow only a few weeks afterwards, and confessed to Aaron with tears in his eyes that he had sinned with one of his previous wives. Aaron forgave him, but a little later found out that Tumara, his young wife, had herself been faithless, and had contracted a terrible disease.

Whatever good Aaron did, however hard he worked for the progress and emancipation of the savages, he was always confronted by the unsurpassable obstacle of disease. Their tendency to sickness, unhealthy conditions of life, the sultry, moist climate, all contributed to make the whole place a hot-bed of maladies. Whilst the new fresh air of Christian principles struggled to sweep across the island, the foul counterblast from hell stopped its advance and poisoned its sweetness.

Aaron had made a manful stand against circumstances, Alone, with only the help of Somna, he had made a determined attempt to improve the conditions.

During a whole night he had sat in his cane arm-chair on the verandah of his bungalow, looking up into the stars, that always manifested to him the remote greatness of the Almighty God, and talked to his Creator, asking Him to help him in his tremendous task. Towards morning he had gone into his bedroom and lain down to rest, shivering in the chilly air that at daybreak settled down over the Pacific and the little island. Finally he had resolved to act on the principle of his thermometer and to divide good from bad.

He had gone once more to Tunga and, with the help of Hezekiah Marva-rao and the council of the twelve elders, had collected together from the overcrowded dwellings all men, women and children who appeared to be untouched by disease and had made them live apart. Somna had helped him in this with her never-failing wisdom and charity. She had understood Aaron's action without asking questions, and had thrown herself body and soul among the rescued, holding before them Christ and His great teaching. Her eyes had sparkled with holy hunger to save souls, and in constant prayer she had found unlimited strength. Finally she had

smashed the pagan idols and had put up in their place Jesus Christ and His simple words.

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Aaron set out with Phillips to find a suitable place for a settlement for the dark people thus snatched from the very gates of death and hell. They found a tract of land three miles east of St. Felix, lying very low, almost under the level of the coral reefs. But it was good land. There was fishing, too, and an ample supply of bread-fruit trees. So he ordered the natives to build new dwellings there, whilst others were to start upon the construction of a new store-house for the superabundant copra.

With business-like instinct Aaron foresaw that he alone would never be able to lend sufficient financial support to his ever-growing undertaking, and he quickly resolved to store away assets which, when realised or exchanged, would at once cover all expenditure and leave a handsome surplus for further development. Up to the present he estimated the copra, safely stored away in dry bundles, at £5,000. He kept careful accounts and had written out a long list of the most necessary articles which, sooner or later, he would be forced to import: garments of all sizes and descriptions; stores of every variety; agricultural implements; and—last, but not least—pigs and fowls who could find nourishment almost anywhere. In addition to that he would try planting rubber and cocoa. Some time in the near future he would have to make a move of some sort to procure all these things, and the thought of going away already weighed heavily on his mind.

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Aaron now turned his gaze away from the little cross and the hut under the bread-fruit trees. His dark brown face was clouded over with sorrow; he was already carrying his own cross and did not know it. He went to his desk, took out the drawing of the thermometer and stared at it for the thousandth time. More than ever he had to come to regard

it as a revelation, and he burned to tell the wide world about it, to have copies of it printed by the million and scattered broadcast over all the great cities of the West. That was his mission. For that God had led him on to this island, had cast Frank Lewis and his wife and child on to this desolate spot. His divine will had been preparing the way for him, a mortal. Aaron only waited for the divine call; when it came he would go out into the world and preach.

Presently the door opened, and an olive-coloured face, with a twinkling, knowing pair of eyes, looked into the room. There was a good-natured Polynesian smile on it, and a kind native voice said:

"Mista Aaron in?"

Aaron turned quickly and said:

"Yes, David—come in. I have been waiting for you."

David Fananao came in and shook hands with Aaron.

He was a small man, with a small head and a large brain. Whilst he had lived in Tunga he had been a quiet, unobtrusive little fellow, with little to say but much to think about. He had never lived with more than two wives at a time, and by profession was a fisherman. On being set aside by Aaron among the "savings," he showed great excitement and seemed very pleased. Somna's eyes had looked into his on several occasions, and something told her of some secret that was hidden in his soul. She questioned him. Little Fananao kept quiet and was obstinate. Somna left him, but did not forget him, and neither did he forget her. On the evening of that very day he had come to her alone, fallen on his knees before her and sobbed his heart out. He had cried and cried, and could not stop, until she had put her gentle hand on his little head and said: "Thou art not a child of darkness any longer, thou believest in the true God." Whereupon David had stretched himself upon the ground and cried, "Thou knowest it, holy woman. I am a child of Jesus Christ." Then he had told her that he had once been a Christian convert, that he had sinned, had wanted to travel and, falling in with the people of Honoruru, had emigrated with them. David had repented of all his sins on the spot, and later Aaron had had a long talk with him and thanked God for the nugget of gold

he had found. On the following Sunday he had re-baptised him by sprinkling water all over him and saying, "E tapape du can ia oe i te o te Medua" (I apply water to you in the name of God), which was the formula adopted by him for the ceremony of baptism.

David was a scholar and could read and write. Aaron was particularly fond of him, and had made him Vicar of New Chelsea two months ago.

"You little fox," he now said. "You secret-monger and actor!"

David smiled and drew out of his hollow hand a small piece of paper, whereon he had written some notes for his sermon in the chapel. Aaron read them. They were all in the form of questions.

"Why do you request to be received into the Church?"

"Why do you think it more suitable that you should join the Church than others?"

"Who do you think are the proper persons to be received into the Church?"

"What is a new heart?"

"Do you think you have obtained a new heart?"

For a while Aaron pondered; then he asked:

"Can you answer all these questions yourself, David?"

David smiled.

"Yes, Mista Aaron—me can."

"I can," corrected Aaron.

"I can," repeated David.

After a pause, Aaron inquired:

"How is your work getting on, David?"

David put his head on one side and said:

"We make great progress. Schoolhouse nearly build. Have twenty-five children for instruction. But have no books. Need books badly and writing materials."

He looked greedily at Aaron's book-stand where Mr. Lewis's books were heaped. Aaron ignored his longing glance, and made a note at the bottom of the never-ending list of things to be imported.

"Books, and stationery for instruction of native children."

"You shall have them in due course," he replied. "Now,

I wish you to say the following words to your congregation to-morrow at the end of your sermon. You might learn them by heart; it'll make a much better impression than if you read from a paper."

Aaron then read:

"Our dear friend and brother, Mr. Aaron West, begs to acknowledge the following amounts of copra delivered during the past week at the storehouse at New Chelsea."

There followed a rigmarole of names and after each name a figure representing the quantity of copra delivered.

David looked horrified.

"I can never learn this by heart," he said frankly.

"No need for that," said Aaron, "but what follows you can."

He continued to read:

"Our dear friend and brother and his white friends will soon leave the island in order to obtain and bring back all things necessary for the alleviation of the pressing needs in all directions. They will, however, not take away the copra in the storehouse, which continues to be common property until the time when it will be sold to pay for expenses incurred."

He slipped the paper into the hand of David, who could hardly understand the meaning of the words, and added:

"No one shall think that I'm going to sail away with common property. . . . See?"

David surely did not understand, but he promised to learn the notice by heart, provided that he could find the time to do so. Before leaving the office he once more stared longingly at the books.

"Mista Aaron," he said humbly, "nice books—will you lend little David one for reading?"

Aaron went to look for suitable literature, saw Tolstoy, Schopenhauer, *Quo Vadis* and the rest, and finally drew out Volume I of the *Lives of English Bishops*, which he gave to David, saying:

"Read that, you little fox, but keep it clean. See? No finger-marks."

"Oh, no, no finger-marks," repeated David, lifting up his legs alternately. Then, taking the book under his arm, he left Aaron with a look of gratitude, licking his lips.

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On the following day Aaron went to church at New Chelsea. A little trodden pathway led him through the lovely woods to the settlement. There, as usual, the storehouse first caught his eye. It was a building quite a hundred yards long and twenty wide, erected by the combined efforts of all the settlers. The walls were white as snow, built of coral cinders mixed with sand and made into large bricks that were porous, crackly, but very dry. A long perspective of rough poles held up the thatched roof inside, and countless bundles of strong-smelling copra were heaped among them. Next to the storehouse was a bungalow inhabited by old Daniel and his daughter, Dorothy. The old man's hair had become white and his legs tottery, but he was quite happy pottering about between Dorothy, the storehouse, the chapel and his fellow-settlers of New Chelsea.

A ring of bungalows nestled along the base of the flat valley opening out to the lagoon, and a mile or so distant, across the still blue waters, were the barrier reefs where the surf foamed.

The managers of Aaron's various departments, Phillips, Dale, Jones, Humphreys and McKay, had each a small doll's-house where they lived with their concubine housekeepers; and to their honour it must be said that they stuck to their word, given to Mr. West, to live in perfect concord together, to behave soberly and kindly, and each one to be satisfied with what he had got. As yet they had no families.

Next to their bungalows was that of the Vicar, David Fananao. The little nugget was married, and had become a shining example of what a Christian husband ought to be. The chapel was close to his little house, and over its ever-open entrance hung the *Amadea's* fire-bell. In addition to these buildings were twenty-odd little cottages all in a row, and in them lived the "savings." Aaron called this little

colony the "nursery," as the souls, male and female, breathing in each of the houses had been baptised and coupled together by him.

As he walked down the broad path of the village, the *Amadea* fire-bell rang and the children of New Chelsea hastened to the chapel at the call to prayer. They were dressed in cloaks, mats, rat-skins, bread-fruit leaves or palm fans. Aaron breathed in the smell of baking bread-fruit coming from the communal oven at the end of the settlement, and watched the scene with pride and sorrow. He thought how much was still needed to make everything perfect. As regards clothing and housing he could succeed, but what could he do against the monster disease? It had already found its way into his nursery. It was like a snake that wound its way unseen, creeping in everywhere, and no one was safe from its poison.

Aaron went to church. But sorrow followed him there. He closed his eyes whilst Vicar David, dressed in a pair of Aaron's pyjamas, read prayers in English from the Common Prayer Book of the late Reverend Frank Lewis, crossing himself innumerable times. He did not see David scramble into the pulpit two feet above the floor, to preach a small sermon to the natives seated below him. Neither did he see Philpot who sat next to Dorothy almost at David's feet, his arm round her olive-coloured waist, and his mouth wide open.

David began to ask the questions he had jotted down the day before, and started a lively debate on the various points, keeping his congregation, however, well in hand, whilst Aaron's mind moved in another direction.

Aaron had worked hard for months, throwing in every ounce of brain and heart to uplift the people of his island; and what was the result? It was small, so small that he was frightened to look upon it.

He who had set out to seek peace and happiness found himself in the midst of sorrows, in a life that was involved and complicated. He had found God, the rock of faith, a sound doctrine of good and evil in his thermometer; but instead of profiting by it himself he was doing nothing but good for

others. His previous life was forgotten, and all his instincts were fundamentally transformed. Whilst his disciples lived apparently happily he was alone in his bungalow and worked far into the nights. He who had never regarded anything but himself had become so self-sacrificing that he could get up at any hour of the night to go to Tunga with the medicine chest. At times things appeared brighter, humanity seemed to be on the upward path; but at other times all looked black, and then Aaron felt like a rock rolling down an incline.

Where would it all end?

Suddenly a voice seemed to say to him:

"Leave this island at once, go into the world with your thermometer. There's an unfulfilled mission for you. Do not any longer feed the islanders on promises. Don't leave your task unfinished. Get what is needed now."

This thought had come to Aaron many times before, but he had put it away from him. He hated the idea of going away. An unknown tie seemed to bind him to the island. He *loathed* the idea of going away. . . .

"It has got to be done, so the sooner the better," the voice persisted.

"Well, I'll go," said Aaron to himself.

And at once he became a much happier man; his self-confidence returned.

He opened his eyes.

"They shall have benches to sit on," he thought. "A good pulpit, cloaks, tools, all that's needed. How could I waver for a moment in my task? I have two missions from God, two peoples to attend to, the millions of white souls, and these, my dark ones."

Once Aaron had formed a resolution it was as good as executed. He never wavered from his own decision, or wangled out of a thing in an attack of weakness. When he set his mind to do a thing, nothing could stop him. Now he felt new blood coming into him. The dullness and impotence disappeared. Clearly before him he saw two distinct claims: the thermometer, and the island.

He did not notice that David's sermon and debate had come to an end.

The nugget now began to read Aaron's proclamation, and looked with excited fear towards "Mista Aaron," because he had not learned it by heart. But Aaron never noticed it. David, however, thinking that Brother Aaron was shamming, and fearing to be thought a trickster by him, deemed it wise to add before leaving the pulpit:

"Mista Aaron wished me to learn this by heart, and I said I would if I had time. I had time, but did not learn it because it is too much for my head. Amen."

Aaron never heard all this, and only returned to reality when he saw his "savings" leaving the chapel. Then he went up to David, shook him heartily by the hand, and said:

"Thank you, David, your sermon was excellent and the men and women love to hear you. What you want to bring home to them again and again is the idea that there is but one great Almighty God, and that to be a true child of His one must be good and kind."

"Ah, Mista Aaron," replied David sorrowfully, "school needed for young children. That is important."

"I know. You shall have everything within a year, I promise you."

"Ah, Mista Aaron, a year—and children will be year older then."

"Quite true," said Aaron. "But it will not be too late."

Chapter XVIII

It was evening. Aaron leaned against the balustrade of the verandah, gazing into the great fireball of the sun, whose periphery gently touched the ocean, transforming it into a sea of heated gold. Or, was it blood? Overhead the sky was of transparent ultramarine blue and one or two stars already glimmered. A heavy yellow moon rose up from the east, hanging low in the sky like an over-ripe sovereign bread-fruit.

The vale was shrouded in mysterious shadows and the little hut under the bread-fruit trees was only faintly visible.

The air was pregnant with the exciting odours of the sensual flowers of the night, slowly unfurling their moist, glossy lips for the kiss of the moon. She travelled through the dark firmament greeting her children with mournful despair, for she was not meant to come down and stay among them.

"This paradise you are going to leave!" said Aaron to himself. "This house and home—to go into the world alone! You have persevered in good deeds; from day to day you have seen your virtue growing. You thought you were strong . . . but what are you now? Your heart is weak; there is softness in your sun-burned body that paralyses you. Yet by your own will you leave the cup of happiness that at last stands before your thirsty mouth. Why do you feel so anxious? Are you not used to pain? Has not your work grown through pain and sorrow to such magnitude that you need new strength to carry your cross? Will God give it to you? He for whom by your own small powers an everlasting temple has been built on this world-forsaken island? Will He guard the feeble result of a sinner's work? Will He keep His eye on Somna with whom you have worked and endured for months, from whom you are now going to part that you may teach civilised men what God is? They will be strangers to you. You will be one against millions. But here you are no longer a stranger. There is another solitary heart that understands you, that feels with you, to whom you would love to pour out your innermost soul, whom you love as you never have loved before."

Aaron felt utterly weak. He held on to the balustrade with desperate force, like the captain who clings to the railing of the bridge when his ship rolls on the ocean in a heavy storm. The golden fire of the sun had vanished, and the silvery moonlight spread over the peaceful island, turning paradise into fairyland.

A little light flickered in the bungalow, uncanny and uncertain. Aaron went in and blew it out. Then he returned to the verandah, again leaned over the balustrade and heard his heart beat wildly in the silence of the lustrous night.

For he saw Somna appear from the shadows of the valley and pass her father's grave. Her long cloak was thrown

back over her left shoulder. Her face looked white. Gracefully, slowly, she came along the little path that connected the two dwellings like a ribbon of love, and when she saw the shadow of the man on the verandah she smiled.

When Aaron heard her lovely deep voice asking, "Art thou ill, dearest friend?" he thought the gentle hand of an angel stroked him. He came down to her, took both her outstretched hands and pressed them fervently.

"No, Somna, I am not ill, but my heart and soul are on fire. My brain is out of order. I don't know what has come over me so suddenly."

She placed her hand on his shoulder, and said:

"Truly thou art ill, Aaron; thy hands are cold. Come thou and walk with me in the woods, and set thy blood moving, and speak to me, for to-morrow thou wilt be gone and I feel sad in my heart."

She smiled with half-closed eyes: a new smile that he had never seen, and that made the earth spin round before him.

"Does she truly love me?" he asked himself.

"I know thou hast much to say to me," she said, whilst they slowly walked along the path leading to the woods and the mountain. "Thou wilt be gone for a long time, very long, and not able to see me. That is why thy heart and soul are afire."

"And you, too, feel sad in your heart, Somna?" he inquired, stopping in front of her, trembling all over.

"Yes," she said, and drew a deep, quick breath.

Then they went on for a while in deep silence and entered the woods of tall palms, where the stillness of a cathedral surrounded them and a dome of slowly moving fans, sprinkled with a million twinkling stars, spread over their heads. The twilight of the moon reigned.

"Dearest," said Somna in a low voice, "canst thou not come back sooner than in twelve months? I am a weak woman, and may spoil thy work in so long a time. Thou hast the greater knowledge of us two, and the higher powers."

"I have not," he replied. "If you could look into my heart you would see there neither knowledge nor power. Only sin and the will to sin lives there. Pray for me, lest I am seized

with weakness and destroy the good that you have called forth in me."

"I will pray to God. But do not say it is I who built an altar in thine heart. Thou knowest it is Jehovah Himself," she replied.

They wandered into the mysterious night, and out of the harmony of two souls came a strange sound that turned it into a discord. Aaron was overcome with bitterness, seized with fury against himself. For days he had felt the demon, who had told him of his love, pulling at his heart-strings; for days he had tried to suppress the inevitable pain which the thought of his last meeting with Somna had roused in him. The idea of parting from her made him turn to the future with dull apprehension. He knew why that was. He couldn't say whether he had always deceived himself, or whether his passion had until now been dormant in his soul, but he knew that he loved Somna, loved her dearly. He would love her for ever and ever. And now in the heat and the odours of paradise, in the magnetic light of the moon, on the eve of his departure, his love broke loose and swept over him like a stormy sea.

He saw all his efforts utterly frustrated, and the temple of God which he had begun to build shaking to its foundations. Was it evil to possess passionate longings? Was it sin, or the will to sin that made him love her?

"No, no!" he cried in his heart. "It is God who tortures me, who has breathed His Spirit into my flesh and blood to make me live and suffer. He has moulded into one my soul and flesh, the good and the evil within me, so that they cannot escape from each other, but must work together like galley slaves, until He takes back from me the Spirit and casts my flesh to rot. Christ says, 'No one is good but one, that is God.' And He lives only in spirit, in eternity. To be without sin means to be without flesh, to be like God. Oh, why am I thus tormented?"

"The woman I love so dearly walks by my side. Her heavenly soul has never tasted evil. Her flesh and blood are cold, untouched, pure. Yet does she not often humbly acknowledge that she is a sinner? If she is a sinner, what was

Jesus? Was He not tempted by the devil? Did not the longings of miserable flesh touch Him, too? Has she a heart of stone, or has she a woman's heart that catches the spark that flies out of man's soul, that catches fire and then blazes as man's never does? Did not her strange smile manifest the hunger of a virgin for the power of man? Would not her divine, indomitable spirit bow to the simple fact that she also is flesh and blood, and born in sin, if God calls it so?

"But if it is not so? If she is really as good as Christ, as high above human temptation as they made Him out to be? What will happen to me then? Oh, God, do not let her be hard on me!"

"Thou art surely ill, dearest," Somna interrupted his thoughts, and in the moonlight her mild eyes looked deeply into his.

Aaron seized his throat as if to strangle himself. He had lost his speech and could not answer. She was overcome with strange apprehension, and grasping his arm firmly, she said:

"Come, dearest, let us walk on quickly. Let us be happy and God will look upon us with joy. For we are only human and God does not want to see us parting sadly. Do not sorrow over thy work. I will continue during thy absence and thy heart shall be gladdened when thou returnest to me. I promise thee."

He let himself be led by her quickly and felt as if he were being carried by a whirlwind.

"By God!" he cried again in his heart. "It is no ordinary lust, no common passion that attacks me. It is love, sacred, divine love which is born in my heart. Love such as no man has ever known; love which will lift me up to heaven, will give me strength, and turn oppressive flesh into a paradise, wherein two spirits will live and drink the water of God."

He walked with her swiftly, stumbling in the darkness over roots that crept over the path, with senses sickening at the warmth of her lovely body. At last they came to the lake bordered with casuarinas. The moon's rays broke on

their glossy foliage and filled the deadly waters with a thousand flashes.

They stopped, and seated themselves on the mossy, sloping carpet that bordered the silent waters full of mysteries. Somna sat upright, staring into the sky, her hands spread out on the ground for support. Her wiry ankles and shapely calves looked white as ivory. Her clear-cut, beautiful face was softened by delicate shadows. Her breathing was deep and hard.

Suddenly she folded her hands and prayed, in a whisper:

"Great Father in heaven, wilt Thou come down to Thy children and bless them. Wilt Thou give strength to Somna and her dearest, whom Thou art sending away to-morrow on a holy mission. Wilt Thou safeguard him body and soul, and bring him back safely. Amen."

Aaron began to quiver, like a thoroughbred horse before a race.

Was it not a prayer of love that Somna had uttered? Was there a woman in the world, mother, wife, or sweetheart, who could ask more of God for the one she loved? he thought, and buried his face in his hands.

Somna looked at him and said:

"Thy sorrows are very great, dearest, and mine are very great. But God sends sorrows to try our hearts. Thy heart is torn by the passions of thy soul which is in darkness. But there will be light again."

Whilst she said this she stroked Aaron's head gently, and repeated sadly:

"There will be light again when thou returnest to me. I feel frightened of my task, but pray thou for thy Somna."

He turned towards her, biting his lips, and a little stream of blood flowed into his beard.

Dare he tell her that every word she spoke, every look from her pure eyes made him long for her more intensely, that a change had come over his spirit, that his soul lived in dark perplexity? Oh, how free would he feel, how unspeakably happy, if his longing could die in the fire that flows from lips to lips! If he could only tell her what she had made of him, how he belonged to her, how he was

blinded by the excess of light that radiated from her!

"Oh, Somna, my senses fail me, the ground begins to move under my feet, you draw me to you with resistless might. I sicken for you—for you alone in the world! For all eternity I belong to you, for ever—ever. Take me as I am, my whole being; take it—for ever—ever!"

He flung his head on her breast with elemental violence. All the chains that had held him burst. He shook from head to foot with the fury of passion, and he cried and sobbed his heart out. His tears penetrated her cloak and she could feel their cool moisture on her body.

"Somna, dearest Somna!" was all he said.

He could get no further in his confession of love, could say nothing more. His throat seemed pressed by unseen hands that strangled his speech.

She closed her eyes whilst she held his head in her arms and pressed it to her bosom tightly.

"Dearest," she said, in a voice no stronger than a breath, "I can feel with thee, thou great man. Thou leavest me, and leavest thy work unfinished. Thou lovest me and thy godly work. Thou art assailed by fears lest love might be lost in thy heart and mine, and work be destroyed during thine absence. But whilst thou goest into the world to seek help for Tunga, remember thou that Somna will be here and will never forget thee, and will pray to Jehovah that He will bless thee and make thee strong and preserve thee in health, to let thee return and finish the work thou hast begun. Somna will take care. . . . Do not weep, dearest."

She stroked his hair gently.

Aaron sobbed, heart-broken, like a babe in its mother's arms. His sore heart was open and poured out in dumb tears what it dared not say in words. All his longings, his sorrows, he confided mutely to the exalted virgin whose gentle hands were holding him with innocent confidence. The warmth of her body penetrated him. Her energy and animal magnetism sent happy shivers through his tormented flesh. "O God! . . . Somna, Somna!" he cried, but she only held his head with firm patience, while her eyes gazed into the nocturnal sky.

"Thou must be hurt in thy deepest soul," continued Somna. "Thy heart must be sick with sorrows, dearest. Wilt thou not tell Somna, that she may partake of them in the spirit of Christ?"

Aaron looked into her eyes for a moment and held his breath. Then, throwing himself back, he cried out:

"Dearest Somna, I am a miserable sinner. Forgive me! Forgive me!"

"I forgive you all," she said warmly. "All. But I am a sinner myself, and my forgiveness will be without value. I will pray to God for thee, dearest, and for myself. God forgives all sins."

"But would you *always* forgive me?" inquired Aaron, holding on to her words fervently.

"I should always forgive thee liberally, without measure, —everything, dearest. For such is the will of God."

"Always? Whatever I did, thought, wanted?"

"Always, whatever it might . . . whatever thou mightst do. If thou drownedest me in sorrow, I would forgive thee in the spirit of Christ."

"But would God forgive like you?"

"No one is good but one, that is God," she replied, "and God forgives all sins."

"Do you think He will forgive me my sins?"

"Surely He will. Thy tears are sacred to Him, as to me. Thou art a passionate man, and God has given thee great powers. Thou art great."

"I am a miserable sinner," replied Aaron, drawing himself up. "But you and the great God forgive sins."

She smiled and said nothing more.

They sat side by side, leaning their cheeks together for a long, long time, watching the shadow of a bat flying erratically over the lake.

"Somna, Somna—to-morrow I'll be gone," whispered Aaron.

"Yes, to-morrow, dearest," she replied.

She closed her eyes and the black lashes hid her tears.

An hour later the moon passed over the obelisk which stood upon the mountain in sinister blackness. Nothing stirred.

They were still in the same place on the border of the lake. She had fallen asleep. Aaron rested his head on her lap, and gazed into the blue night.

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A deputation, headed by Hezekiah Marva-rao and the twelve elders, came across the mountain at daybreak to bid farewell to Brother Aaron and his disciples. They made for New Chelsea, where they joined David Fananao and the settlers.

The fire-bell rang from the little chapel, and the concubines of the departed seafarers stood outside their dolls'-houses and wept their eyes out. Crowds collected to receive the brethren from Tunga. It was arranged between Hezekiah and David that they should all take a meal together and then proceed towards the beach off which the *Amadea* was moored, in order to hold a farewell service and see the white friends depart.

Aaron had been aboard several times and had worked conscientiously with his crew. Ballast had been taken in. The sails had been spread out and thoroughly overhauled on the beach. Now they fluttered to and fro in the eddies of the trades and the schooner swayed with pride on the still waters.

The procession of natives was waiting on the sands of the lagoon and watching some great sharks which sped through the waters on the surface, chasing to and fro playfully and dashing to the masses of collected bird-droppings that were swept overboard into the water.

Aaron was still in St. Felix, sitting at his roll-top desk.

Somna was seated on his right, Philpot on his left.

"So that's settled," Aaron addressed Philpot. "Since you are lawfully married to Dorothy, you can't live in my bungalow whilst I am away. You needn't trouble about any books, except the stock book, which you are to keep according to instructions. And you are to see that work is continued in Tunga and New Chelsea without stoppage. If there are any questions or misunderstandings, you are to refer them to Miss Lewis and obey her instructions. She has full command of everything. Don't forget!"

He paused for a moment to clear his throat, and then he increased his voice to encourage himself in this bitter hour.

"Here's the document drawn up by me in case the Frenchmen should come during my absence. I don't suppose they will, but they might. You might ask them, if they come, to leave some of their stores here, and give them this bill of exchange which I leave blank. It's all ready and signed. You need only fill in the amount for whatever they may ask. Provided, of course, that they want to deal. I don't know if they will. Now, if any questions arise regarding the church, and so forth, refer them all to Miss Lewis. You can always find out where Miss Lewis is by going over to Mrs. Lewis. She is always at home. Isn't it so, Somna?"

She nodded.

"Very well then, Philpot, I'll part from you here. When I've gone, your duties commence. I trust you."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any other wish?"

"No, sir."

"Now—are we square?"

"All right, sir, I hope you'll come back soon, and safely."

"Then, good-bye."

Philpot said "*Au revoir*," but it sounded like "Olive Oil."

Aaron made a dive for his bag, beckoned Somna to come with him, and left the bungalow hurriedly.

When he had gone, Philpot stood in the middle of the room, looking abject in his pain. Then he began to potter about the office, not knowing what he saw or did. And he whistled incessantly.

* * * * *

Aaron and Somna did not speak a word whilst they went through the woods to the beach. Sorrow and pain went with them all the way. They saw the procession waiting for them, and before leaving the wood Aaron dropped his bag on the ground and grasped Somna's hand. He jerked his arm as if to draw her nearer, groaned, and said:

"God bless you, dearest, dearest, Somna."

Then he held her soft hands to his cheeks for a while, kissed them, blushed, picked up his kit-bag and went on, consoling himself with the tears that ran down her cheeks.

But his heart was breaking.

Waiting to receive them were sixty souls, some crying and sighing, others looking anxious and devout, but all stricken with sadness. Dale and Jones stood next to the whaler, ready to row their captain to the *Amadea*.

Little David headed the procession. Hezekiah was just behind him. During the hours of waiting it had been arranged between them that David should deliver a farewell address in the form of a short sermon. He was wearing the pyjamas.

Aaron shook hands with them all. It was a hard hour for him. He had never realised how much he had become attached to his islanders until this moment when he had to leave them.

David pulled out from somewhere the little Common Prayer Book and read some English prayers, crossing himself all the time. Then he put the book away and spoke in native.

"Our great white brother going . . . gone. We feel pain, but Jehovah is our consolation. Our hearts are full of thanks and waiting for his return. May he not be drowned in the sea, nor eaten by the shark, nor cast on the rocks. May he find his great white friends full of happiness. May he be assured that his humble brother David and his humble brother Hezekiah and all their humble congregation will work in the spirit of Jehovah, and obey the commands of Tata-hita and the Council and the Mista Philpot. May he find the store-house full when he returns to us. Amen."

The congregation repeated, "Amen."

Hardly able to control his feelings, Aaron said:

"Dearest friends, brothers and sisters, I feel the importance of my mission. Whilst I am going to enlighten my own people, I will think of you day and night. Always remember that there is but one true great God, and to be a true child of His one must be humble, good and kind." Pointing to Somna, he continued, "Miss Lewis is taking charge of all your souls. When you are in trouble, do not ask counsel of

each other, but go to her. Be good and kind, and may God bless you all."

He raised his hands. Then all fell on their knees.

"God bless you all!" he repeated.

Then he took Somna's hand once more, pressed it hard, picked up his bag and stepped into the whaler with Dale and Jones.

* * * * *

Somna and the children of Tunga stood on the beach till the sun began to set. Their feelings were very much the same as Mista Aaron's, who thought his heart had been split in two.

The *Amadea* was far out on the ocean, tacking on her way to 'Frisco.

THE THIRD JOURNEY

THE THIRD JOURNEY

Chapter XIX

Aaron felt none of his former patriotism when he walked to his flat in Albert Hall Mansions on a foggy, dreary day in December. His lips were set tight, and he was beaming with health and strength, so much so that Londoners stared at the little man who had a face of bronze at such a time of the year. But no sooner was he out of their sight than he was forgotten again, except perhaps by a very few observant dwellers in the great city. These before going to bed on that day recalled to their minds his fanatical, piercing stare which had seemed to penetrate into their inmost privacy.

When Aaron ascended the stairs to his flat, he said: "This London is hell!"

He dropped his bag heavily and rang the bell.

No one answered. No one expected him.

The man who comes back into the world with a message from God does not announce himself like a common traveller. He comes like a storm, a whirlwind from the unseen, and takes everybody by surprise. At any rate Aaron thought that it ought to be so, and his intention was to fall like a thunderbolt on London, the greatest city of the world, and with a jerk uproot all evil and scatter the sins and falsehoods of the people as one might scatter the contents of a wastepaper basket into the fire. To him the civilised world had become a place of evil smells and seemed ridiculously small in comparison with the forces driving behind his heart and soul. For divine revelation has no end, it is unfathomable, is matter unseen, uncontrollable. And when it is coupled with fiery passion, with love unspeakable, all other things appear like dust in comparison with it.

Aaron pressed the electric bell relentlessly, and it buzzed all through the flat to announce his sudden return.

Presently there came footsteps, the door was opened, and a strange maid's voice inquired:

"Who is there?"

"Who do you think it is—eh?" grumbled Aaron as he entered. "It's I. Who are you?"

"I'm Betty, the housemaid."

"How long have you been here?"

"Six months, sir. Don't be cross, please. Are you perhaps Mr. West?"

"I believe I am. . . . Why?"

"I thought I recognised you from madam's description to Mr.——"

"What's that? . . . Mr.—who?"

"Nothing, sir. Madam described your appearance."

"To whom did you say she described it? Here, take my bag into my bedroom."

Betty took the bag.

"To whom did you say she described me?" Aaron repeated.

"I don't know the gentleman's name."

"What did Mrs. West say?" he insisted.

"She said, sir, that you might come back unexpectedly, and showed me a photograph of you, sir. She didn't describe you to anyone."

Aaron looked blank for a while.

"So she showed you a photograph! H'm—well, well, Betty, it's a poor picture I'm making. Now, where's Mrs. West?"

"She's gone out, sir."

"When will she be back?"

Betty looked at the clock. It was then three o'clock in the afternoon.

"I don't know, sir," she said.

"When did my wife go out, then?"

"I don't know, sir."

"H'm, h'm!" grunted Aaron, and began to wander through the rooms. He switched on the lights, for night had already

set in over London. There were the morocco arm-chairs, all the same old things ready for the comforts of lazy people. He sat down and was immediately seized with a deep loathing for civilisation and life in the West. All the cigars and cigarettes and whiskies in the world no longer attracted him. He had freed himself from all those habits. His nervous system was regenerated and fresh, his vitality such that it turned from all the things which were nothing but stimulants for wretched and, in his opinion, decadent souls and bodies. He had freed himself from them for all time, and the longer he now remained in the atmosphere of comfort, the more discomfort he felt.

He had been sent by God to preach. He had two hundred souls depending on him. His position was dignified, exalted. The old surroundings were inappropriate, utterly useless now. He said to himself that he could not live here during his stay in London. He would take more humble rooms and spend as little money on himself as possible, for every pound he possessed was needed to back up his new undertakings, the thermometer and the island. As far as he could calculate, there was, roughly speaking, a capital of £25,000 still at his disposal at the bank, of which 20,000 were under Victoria's name.

But there was a Mrs. West, too, and not at the bank.

Aaron had thought little or nothing about her for almost a year. He had never missed her. He had become wifeless during that time, and his love (or what he had thought to be love) had died out like the sparkle in wine. He discovered that he could do without her, and that he was even happier without her.

In his life on the island, where he had toiled at the feet of God and in companionship with purity, he had practised monk-like austerity. There had only been one outburst of passion and love before leaving Somna, and that had been natural enough. When, however, a woman like Somna triumphs in a man, there is little room for a Victoria. In fact, there was now no room at all for her; she had been expelled, and had become to Aaron as a total stranger.

Why? He could not say. But he realised whilst sitting in the flat that he did not care for Victoria in the least. He was not going to break away from his austere practises. He owed that to his holy mission and Somna's purity. He had made up his mind not to fall, but to remain perched on his home-made pedestal. Nevertheless, he looked forward with nervous anxiety to meeting his wife, because she would naturally, so to say, be the first to come under the plough of religion and of God, and would be a fair example of what he was able to accomplish with the thermometer.

"No use wasting my time here," he thought. "I'd better look round for some suitable lodgings. Now, what about Victoria? That maid, Betty, has told me a pack of lies. I'll go and find out the truth."

He got up from his arm-chair and went into the hall.

There was Betty, just slipping into a yellow mackintosh.

"Where are you going, Betty?" he asked, with mournful sternness.

"I'm just going down High Street to get some dinner for you, sir."

"Can't the cook or somebody else do that?"

"Well, you see, at present Mrs. West has no cook. The last one stayed only two days. It's so difficult to get cooks nowadays, you know."

"What's the paper in your hand, eh?"

Betty blushed, and said:

"Nothing, sir, only I've got such a bad memory I always jot down things when I go shopping."

"Got a bad memory, have you? Oh, well, let's see what you've got written down."

Betty looked very sick and anxious. She cleared her throat and smiled, blushing redder and redder. Finally she looked like a polished apple in a greengrocer's window. Aaron held out his hand and she gave him the paper. He read what she had written.

It was a telegram: "Mrs. West, *King's Hotel*, Birmingham. Mr. West has returned suddenly. Will you come home, madam. Betty."

For a moment Aaron looked terrible, and whilst he gazed

at the housemaid little white figures appeared all over his sun-burned skin. He ground his molars, and commanded:

"Come into the sitting-room, you—woman—come!"

She followed him, trembling all over, and when the door was shut she collapsed and burst into a flood of servant's tears.

"Mr. West, Mr. West—sir, I didn't—didn't want to. I said . . . Tswewew! Tsew! Tsew!"

Aaron put the telegram in the middle of the table, and coming up to her laid his hand on her shoulder with pedagogic kindness.

"You wicked child!" he said. "Don't you know that you are on the road to hell? Lying is evil. Now, dry your false tears and answer my questions truthfully. Then I'll forgive you, as true as there's a God in heaven."

Thereupon Betty completely broke down and ran sobbing into a corner, leaning against the wall with her face wrapped up in the yellow mackintosh.

Aaron waited patiently. At last Betty recovered. Her tears had washed some of Mrs. West's powder and rouge from her cheeks and, incidentally, somewhat cleansed the skin underneath. Now she looked just Betty, the housemaid.

"Now, let us go all over it again," said Aaron. "How did you know I was Mr. West?" Betty's eyes became shifty. "I want a straight answer. Don't take a long time to think about it."

"Well, sir," she replied, with intermittent little sobs, "while madam was away, I saw a photograph album on the pianer, and saw——" She ran to get the album, brought it and showed it to Aaron. "I saw this." She turned the pages and found his picture, on which was written, "To my darling wife. Bournemouth," etc. "This, you see, sir."

"But I was clean-shaven then. How did you recognise me now, with a beard?"

"The eyes, sir, the eyes. A woman always knows a gentleman by the eyes."

"Well, I'll take it for granted that you speak the truth. Now—I want to know something else, and you'd better be

quite frank with me, for I'm master here, and I shall dismiss you from service at once unless you speak the truth. On the other hand, I can also keep you and make things better for you."

Betty brightened up at once. Her weathercock turned in the wind.

"I always thought it would end like that, sir. Don't think I wished to deceive you; I only wanted to be loyal to me mistress."

"But you were dishonest, and very near hell."

"I know, sir," she replied, with a sob. "I don't want to be near hell. And I told Mrs. West when Mr. King stayed here that if I had a husband and he were away——"

"Mr.—*what's* his name?" cried Aaron, whilst the little figures came back into his face.

"Mr. Jack King," said Betty, retreating a few paces.

"Stayed here! In my flat?"

"Yes, sir, but now he and madam have gone away travelling to what they call the provinces. He's an artist, and always very rude, like all artists are, and no gentleman."

Aaron paced up and down the room looking very grave. After a pause he said, "Why did you want to send that telegram?"

"Madam told me to send all this week's letters on to her at the *King's Hotel*, Birmingham, and to the *Palace Hotel*, Glasgow, next week, also the letters that came here for Mr. King."

"When was Mrs. West here last?"

"Four weeks ago, sir, when Mr. King performed at the Tivoli. He gave me a free seat in the stalls. Of course I wouldn't take it, but madam made me. I'm sorry now."

"Did Mrs. West say when she would be back?"

"Madam said if you didn't come home before, sir, she would come back from a tour in Scotland in January."

"How was she to know when I came back?"

"Madam expected a cablegram from you to tell her."

"Oh!"

Aaron let himself fall into an arm-chair.

"That's where the devil made a slip," he thought. "A

little mistake and all is found out. What a rotten wife I've got! Never mind! I'll settle her yet, and that yellow wonder. I hoped to surprise her, but, by God! I've got a fine surprise!"

In his heart he boiled with fury. He felt murderous, outraged. So suddenly had the news come to his ears that he could hardly grasp its meaning. With the greatest difficulty he controlled his feelings. His mind began to work. He had no time to lose. He must do something. He could not sit and brood; he would have to act, get even—even with them both.

"Betty!" he cried out, whilst his eyebrows went up and down. "You say Mr. King stayed here. Where the hell did he sleep?"

"In madam's room, sir, though it's hardly nice to say so. But I took in the tea every morning."

"Did many people come to see them?"

"Yes, sir, there were large parties, all of them artists, of course, not decent people."

"What did they do?"

"Ate and drank."

"What?"

"Champagne, and good things."

"Oysters?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just what I thought!"

Aaron groaned deeply. Then he got up and paced up and down for a while. After a long pause he laid his hand on Betty's shoulder again and said:

"You're a wicked, misled child. But now you've spoken the truth, so I'll forgive you." He raised his eyebrows and looked intent. "But you will turn over a new leaf. You have been possessed by the devil; henceforth you must begin to aim to become a child of God. There's only one God, and to be a true child of His one must be good."

Betty burst into tears once more.

"Oh, Mr. West, Mr. West, I will be good. I have done no wrong. I'm still a good girl, and I give me mother half-a-crown every week."

"God does not reckon in half-crowns," said Aaron, with intense disgust. "He wants to know what you have in your heart, not in your purse. Now go and wash your face, and take off that mackintosh. It smells."

Betty went away sobbing. Aaron followed her to the door, and whilst she hung the mackintosh on the hall-stand he asked:

"How much do you get a week?"

"Twelve and six, sir, and ten shillings board wages."

"Well, you will now be my servant, become a child of God, and have fifteen shillings a week and I pay for your food."

Betty went towards the kitchen, crying with all her might and stammering:

"I will—wash—my face—Mr. West."

Later in the evening Aaron left the flat and went to an hotel near Paddington Station. He had suddenly remembered having been told by a flying acquaintance in Sumatra that it was simple and cheap. He took a room for three shillings a night, including eggs and bacon in the morning, and in that room he sat thinking and planning until past midnight. He had left Betty in the flat, to take care of what he called "the place of sin." She was his first convert, and he was not at all sure if God had not sent her into the flat to give him a valuable encouragement.

He was up and about early on the following morning. He looked down from the rickety window that had rattled all night in the storm, into the dark, foggy street below, and once more compared London with hell. But in spite of everything he had slept well and now felt full of energy, ready for his task, or rather, tasks—for he had many.

The infidelity of his wife worried him bitterly. He had reviewed the past years of his married life, had brooded over every incident that he could recall to memory, and had ended up by thinking that Victoria was an arch-hypocrite, a venomous female, stuffed with lies and deceit; really not worth troubling about any further. That yellow wonder of hers came in for the larger share of his wrath. That fellow was the cause of all the mischief: an arch-thief of weak women's hearts, a destroyer of morality, a Beelzebub, a murderer. Wife and children had suffered death through his negligence,

his associations with low-down women. And he had stolen Victoria into the bargain! Aaron thought of going off to Birmingham to give them both a pleasant surprise; but on second thoughts decided not to do so. The cost of his railway ticket would buy a suit of clothes for Marva-rao, and that was of more importance than travelling after "those two others" in a hurry.

He would get even with them in the end, and probably make them believe in God and in his thermometer. Subconsciously Aaron was perhaps glad that his wife was not in London just then, that he need not bother about anybody and so was free to concentrate on his schemes for God's kingdom and his two hundred souls. However, he did not go so far as to thank God for it, or to think that His divine will had been at work in the matter.

He went out in Praed Street, his cap on the back of his head, his fists thrust deep into his trousers pockets, and felt intensely cold. The wind cut sharply through his worn-out blue serge jacket, and his ears began to freeze.

Looking into a broad shop-window where a pile of coats was exhibited, he thought to himself that it might be wise to procure one of them. He looked up for the name of the proprietor of so many coats and saw three brass balls.

"Good enough," he reflected. "That'll do me."

"I want a strong, warm overcoat," he said to a young man with a red, pimple-covered face, and eyes full of peculiar sagacity which looked at him through gold-rimmed spectacles with almost pious disinterestedness.

"Yes, sir. How much?"

"Anything cheap will do."

"Well, you see, things have all gone up. The price of wool is higher."

"How much has wool gone up?"

"A lot, sir."

"Well, I don't want any wool. I want a coat. Let's have a look at one."

The sagacious young man came forward, measured Aaron, went to a corner, fetched a coat, and said:

"Try that one, sir."

Aaron slipped it on and felt warm immediately.

"Fits like a glove," said the sagacious young man. "Three pounds ten."

"Fits—does it?" grunted Aaron. "It's warm. H'm! Three pounds ten? That's a lot of money, you know."

"Try another one, sir."

"No, I think I'll keep this one."

Aaron discovered a label with a number written on and the price: £3. He paid three pounds.

"Three pounds ten, sir."

"Three pounds, sir."

"Couldn't do it. Try another one."

"Look at that ticket, young man. It says £3."

"That's a mistake. Excuse me." He took the ticket and, with a pencil, added 10s.

Aaron looked formidable in the coat. It reached almost to his toes and covered his hands. He spoke with a convincing grunt in his voice.

"It seems to me that you, too, have made a mistake."

"Yes?"

"Well—you'll suffer for it."

The sagacious young man waggled his head, sighed and said:

"Never mind, sir. As it's you, we'll let it be. Three pounds. All right. I'll take it. But I couldn't do it for anybody else. Hope you'll come again."

"Young man, you cheat, and cheating is a sin," said Aaron, sounding a preaching note. "There's a God above us and He remembers all those ten-shilling bits you stick on to freezing people. You're on the road to hell. Turn back, before you're swallowed up in the cesspool of the Devil. God bless you."

Aaron walked out of the shop.

"Fancy trying that sort of game on me!" he thought.

On and on he wandered through the London streets, staring at numberless strange faces, and luxuries worth fortunes. Love and kindness disappeared from his heart as he realised more accurately the immensity of the task that lay before him.

What did all these hungry-eyed, greedy, sensual masses know of God? They were all, without exception, on the road to hell, their feet licked by the flames of the Devil's cesspool. And this in spite of the churches whose bells chimed away the weary hours night and day. He looked ferociously at the large houses of the well-to-do. There they dwelled: money-bags, conventionality, stateliness, hidden vice, false saintliness; and outside on the pavement stood the blind beggar, the blind man who could only see at night; whose only thoughts were for his pennies. The more he got, the more good old English ale would he pour into his seedy stomach in some back-street public house.

"Civilisation!" cried out Aaron in his soul. "You need the cat-o'-nine-tails! You mechanical humanity! Why, you're no better than my two hundred dark souls. You want clearing out with a sound purgative to cleanse your blood. No wonder God sends you fogs all the year round, and damp and rain and mud. That's the ground you need to vegetate on, and I was born among ye. Think of it! I! Now a child of the sun, a simple, savage fellow, ignorant of half the things you know. But I'm going to show ye what God is."

At last Aaron arrived at his bank, where he asked for the manager and with him discussed his money matters. When he left the bank a little later, the white figures were again perceptible on his skin. He determined to pay a flying visit to Birmingham, even if Marva-rao had to go without jacket and trousers.

Chapter XX

Victoria was one of those people who desire and suffer from the fulfilment of their desires; who live from day to day like the may-fly that flutters over a little stream, always frivolous, but always in danger.

With no firm ground under her feet she just "butterflied" about, knowing very well what she wanted, and how to get it.

In her association with disreputable King, upon which people of her own creed looked with veiled jealousy, she kept up

a certain amount of stateliness, and by his friends was considered a lady with a snub-nose. She seemed to be rolling in riches, and travelled about in expensive fur coats carrying bags made of snakeskin and stuffed with valuable cut-glass bottles with engraved gold tops. She was all gold and silk and polished finger-tips; and never did any work, unless it was work to turn the leaves of illustrated weeklies and the *Journal des Modes*. Hotel managers naturally loved her, received her on the doorstep, and cashed her cheques without a murmur of inquiry.

Jack King was on to a good thing. Some fellows of his profession showed their burning envy by making up the most scandalous rumours about him and jerking their faces when calculating the luck of the Apollonic phenomenon. Supposition was plentiful, and some of it was very near the truth.

The acrobat was ultra smart, more princely, more intellectual-looking than ever. From an ecclesiastic whom he had observed in a railway carriage he had learned a new way of pursing the lips and of slightly drawing down the corners of the mouth. This increased the appearance of sarcasm in his good-looking face. Had he said: "I'm Prince So-and-so, or Lord So-and-so," the natural reply would have been, "Yes, of course you are. How foolish of me not to know that."

Whilst Aaron was seated in a corner of a third-class carriage in the Midland express, flying towards Birmingham, and thinking about the unwritten law, God's judgment, stolen sums of money, Somna, and the English winter, Victoria stood at the window of her room at the *King's Hotel*. Her back was turned towards the dimly-lighted room, where a flickering coal fire revealed her paramour, Jack, sitting close by it on a stool, as silent as a mummy.

She looked out into the dismal twilight of on-coming night and was full of mysterious shivers and strange apprehensions. She had begun to be disgusted with the bargain she had made with life. Her romance weighed upon her body and spirits, and she felt sick to death of Jack King.

Her life being nothing but a succession of pleasures, and all the pleasures having been methodically exhausted, Victoria turned with bitterness to find consolation within herself. But

there was nothing in her soul to which she could cling to save herself. In her heart was nothing but a vast blank. She felt so exhausted and weary that she lost her temper with herself, everything and everybody, and cursed herself, her lover, the hotel, Birmingham, and the whole world. While she was doing this she looked nevertheless very handsome, though her eyes were perhaps a little worn around their sharply-defined corners, and a couple of thin, scarcely visible lines hardened the muscles round her mouth.

In her accesses of boredom Victoria had on previous occasions experienced sensations similar to those by which she was now visited. She had generally found a way to relieve herself, and tried to think of one now.

Formerly she had sometimes had recourse to a violent row with Jack, in order to stir up the stagnant atmosphere that followed her everywhere like a curse. She had even had passages of arms with him in which she had been hopelessly out-classed by the modern Apollo. But though beaten she had generally felt some relief, and they had ended up their fisticuffs by saying to each other: "Haven't we got to know each other well? I don't think there's another couple like us in the world." Jack was convinced that he was taking the right line when he knocked his mistress about with all the devices of a professional pugilist, and he often said to Victoria: "It does you good to be knocked about. I know women love it."

In the love-scenes which generally followed, Victoria came round to Jack's opinion and said, "A jolly good scrap is the pepper and salt of life." Jack thought so too, especially as he was the winner, and said, "It makes me feel all the sweeter afterwards. It's a jolly good thing."

Now Victoria stared mechanically into the street where masses of people rushed about in the lights of the town, making for their homes. For once she thought that fisticuffs would not do the trick. Her state of mind was too desperate for that. She was sick of Jack, sick of life, void of mental resources, empty, blown. How was she to go on with it? Her features appeared stony and pale in the white light of the arc-lamp falling in from the street. At times she trem-

bled slightly, with a deep-down, uncanny fear that ran all over her body like the forerunner of a deadly illness.

With it there came before her mind's eye a short, thick-set man, with the slow, certain gestures of an ape. And whilst the minutes passed, whilst Jack lighted cigarette after cigarette and stared at her from the dark with watchful, cat-like eyes, she felt as if the top-heavy figure of her husband was coming nearer to her, like a ghost. If he were sitting behind her now? If Jack had suddenly disappeared, and *he* was there? If his piercing eyes were fixed on her in savage, brutal desire to make her pay for what she had done? Victoria looked round in terror. Jack's face gleamed up for a moment as he took a violent suck at his cigarette.

Aaron was not there, but fear did not leave her. He might come, come at any moment. Supposing he did not cable his arrival? She might be found out, and murdered by him! Death seemed to glare at her through the windows. She shuddered, groped for the back of a chair, and sat down. Then she covered her face with both her hands.

After lighting another cigarette, which he drew out of a heavy gold case, Jack got up. He looked at his watch and took a few paces towards Victoria.

"I'm due for the first house in three-quarters of an hour, Vic. I'll be off soon."

"Well, go," she answered.

"Aren't you coming to see me for once?" he inquired. "You never come to the show now."

She looked up, pale and icy.

"What's up, old girl?" he asked in an aggressive way.

"Nothing. Go!" she replied.

His quick temper rose.

"That isn't the way to talk to me," he said sharply. "I want to know what's up."

"Go to your show and leave me alone," she said, with disgust in her voice.

Jack laughed like a parrot.

"Show, show!" he repeated. "I don't care a damn for the show. I'll give it up for two pins. Why should I always work? I don't see why I should."

"You'd better not give it up," she said, with a cold threat in her voice. "You might have to work soon, even if you don't want to."

"So that's what you've been brooding over by the window! Now I know it. You've got the hump, and I'm to be fussed for it. As if I cared a damn for what you say. You've told me that a hundred times. It misses fire now. Why don't you say you want a row? I'm quite ready for it—see!"

"I'm not going to give you a chance this time. Now, go, and leave me alone. Otherwise, I'll go, and it will be good-bye."

"*You* go," repeated Jack, sneering ferociously. "I should like to know where you'll go without me."

"I've got a home and you haven't," she replied.

"And what about him?" he inquired, becoming red in the face.

She rose from her chair.

"Will you mind your own business?" she said pointedly. "My husband has nothing to do with you."

This was the opening round of a fight. Jack knew it and Victoria knew it. But Victoria also knew that this time it would be more than an ordinary fight. For she felt that the outcome of it would make a lasting difference to her life. Nevertheless, she welcomed it. Anything for a change! It made her care little whether or not she meant what she was going to say. At any rate it would now have to come out that she hated him and wanted to get rid of him.

"As you are pressing the point," she said, collecting herself, "I think I'd better tell you straight away that I'm sick of you. After all, I'm not bound to you. You have no hold on me, though perhaps you think you have. Your threats don't upset me any more. If you want to tell my husband, you'll have to hurry up, as I'm going to write and tell him all to-night."

Jack burst into a forced laugh. He slung abuse at her and said, still cutting into his speech with peals of merriment:

"You write to him! Lord, what do you think he is? A chapel priest who forgives the sins of anyone who can make a long face?" He illustrated this by a grimace. "*You* tell

him!" he continued, almost an octave lower in voice. "He'll be at you like a gorilla and tear you to pieces."

"*And* you," she said coldly, in a low voice.

Her words cut sharply into the inomentary silence.

"Me!" shouted Jack, an octave higher again. "Lord, this is too funny! You're kidding! Get away! Gee!"

He pushed his forefinger into her ribs provokingly, and repeated his parrot chuckle.

Victoria turned a shade paler. But she said nothing.

"You are a funny little woman," said Jack. "You're spoilt. You don't work for your living like me. I think you ought to, but of course you're no good at anything, except sleeping."

He was astonished to see Victoria so cool. His last words, he thought, would bring her out of herself and give him a chance for a well-aimed blow which would knock sense into her.

"That's all you're good for. Get me?" he said, with a shifty look.

Then came a momentary silence, which she broke.

"You idiot!" she said, without hiding her fury. "You idiot! You live on me, and haven't enough sense to take care that you may continue to do so. Do you think I need you? Or do you think you need me? There are other women just as good and perhaps even more accomplished in the art of sleeping than I am. All you need from me is money—money which you know I am stealing from my husband. But, wait a minute!" She half closed her eyes, and with a trembling gesture kept him quiet for a moment. "That money I gave you was not to pay for your amusements, it was merely to pay for my own. It was stolen money with which I bought you, because I took a fancy to you. That fancy has gone, and I keep the rest of the money, which, by the way, I get in a lawful way, to buy myself another fancy as soon as I find one. See?"

Seeing that her speech had been effective, she turned away and shrugged her shoulders gracefully, adding, "Pretty difficult to find fancies among men, when one has come a cropper like me!"

Jack was baffled. Victoria became a stranger to him, and

he felt that she was serious. The ground gaped before him and he shied like a horse on the edge of a sudden decline. For a moment he was disarmed because she had seen through him. He had felt vaguely that such a crisis might one day arise in his life, but had never thought it would come so suddenly. There had been no thunder to warn him of the coming storm that had set in all of a sudden and threatened to upset the pleasant progress of his life. Had Jack not been Jack, or had he been a passionate southerner, he might have fallen on his knees and sobbed, knocked his head against a wall in despair and disappointment, or lashed himself into a passionate outburst of love in order to prove that his Lady was wrong, wrong, . . . that she misunderstood him fundamentally. Or, perhaps, as a last resource, he might have pointed a gun at his own forehead as a still more convincing argument of his undying devotion! If only she would not throw him over, cast him away from her to lead his old life, with a bare music-hall salary and new women, new sorrows. Such a temperament might have saved the situation for him. It might even have laid the foundation of a better understanding, perhaps in the end of a sort of love. But Jack's temperament was otherwise. Love to him was neither passionate music nor melancholy poetry; it was animal, muscular, disorderly, and sometimes ferocious.

Victoria had spoken the truth, and it had hit him like a shot. But whereas the acceptance of a truth is the best defence against its consequences, he thought of nothing but his muscles, where all his strength was centred.

Quick as a panther he caught Victoria by the shoulders and threw her on to the bed. She rose up quickly with indignant fury.

"Brute! Brute!" she hissed between her teeth. "Do what you like with me, but you shall hear the truth, you black-mailer, you murderer! Doesn't the whole world know that your wife and children gassed themselves through you? That you have lived on women ever since you were a boy?"

Her lover caught her by the hair. She screamed. A torrent of abuse came from him.

"You hound!" Victoria cried. "This is the end of it!"

She made a rush at the bell to summon the servants, but he caught her in his arms and threw her back once more on to the bed, laughing inhumanly as he did so. She lay still for a moment, her eyes looking around for some weapon. He continued to laugh at her. Then she sprang up again, and said, with an outburst of tears:

"How dare you! Get out of my rooms!"

King answered her with abuse, adding, "I'll show you how I dare!"

And before she had time to call out for help, he hit out for her chin. She fell on the carpet.

King waited for a minute, leaning forward with clenched fists, all the time hearing the thud of her fall sounding in his ears. She did not get up, but he saw that at any rate she breathed. Then with deliberation he cocked a hat on his yellow hair, slipped into his fur coat, and went out, banging the door behind him.

When he left the hotel to go to his performance, his knees were shaky. He could still hear the thud of Victoria's fall, could still see her white face and closed eyes. He was uneasy in his mind. Something final and terrible seemed to stare at him from every corner of every street. Many times he was on the point of turning back to her; not to ask forgiveness, but just to pick her up from where she lay. She might be seriously hurt. After all, it wasn't nice to hurt a woman, especially one from whom he had received nothing but kindness. He turned into a public house and drank half a dozen "drops" of neat whisky in succession, a thing he was never in the habit of doing before a performance. Finally he went to the theatre and entered through the stage door. There remained but ten minutes in which to undress for his turn before the public.

* * * * *

During the scene in Mrs. West's suite of rooms, Aaron unostentatiously entered the hotel, like a man who has travelled a great deal. He did not make inquiries from the hall-porters lest his wife might get to know of his presence. It was his experience that the exercise of self-control contributed *a priori* to all successes in life; that the loss of it entailed

unprofitable consequences. He ached to hit King on the nose, to horse-whip his wife, but after a moment's reflection he decided that such revenge would be cheap and against the principle of his thermometer. There were measures outside the radius of brutal force, more effective, more terrible than the hardest knuckle-duster or the most lashing horse-whip. Nevertheless, his intentions towards the acrobat-comedian were of a deadly nature.

Aaron tried to convince himself that common jealousy and the desire for his rival's blood were not the reasons for his coming to Birmingham. His trip was, he said to himself, of a more business-like character. He wanted to know what had become of the twenty thousand pounds of Metropolitan Stock that had once been in the bank, his hard and fast property, although it stood in the name of his wife. He had left it when he had sailed for the island, to give her a "backbone." But to his horror the backbone had vanished. Which dog had devoured it? That was the question, and a deadly serious one, for two hundred lives and a religious scheme of the first magnitude had depended on it.

No doubt the telepathic powers of Aaron's primeval animal mind had communicated with Mrs. West. Of this communication her husband was quite unaware. He stood in a corner of the hall scanning the theatrical bills with fierce eyes. When he read Jack King's name he felt a sting in his flesh, and thought he would go and see him perform. It was a joy, and at the same time a torture, to have his birds cornered with such nicety, to have both barrels fixed on them, to be their master and judge without their knowing it. He was like a silent fate that watches sinners and gloats over their coming doom.

Whilst he stood in the hall, King dashed past him, without seeing him and without being seen by him.

A little later Aaron went to the theatre and took a seat in the front row. He kept on his heavy coat and his hat, glad to feel warm at last. He looked around, almost bewildered, into the crowd behind him, and shook his head with apparent sadness.

"Are these civilised people?" he asked himself. "Sucking oranges, chocolates, smoking, chatting! They are like monkeys who need amusement to fill out their hollow heads."

Then he looked at the platform and thought how great it would be if he could stand there and tell all these ignorant souls what God was and reveal to them all His divine revelation. He could so easily have made them understand all the ins and outs of life, illustrating his words by means of his thermometer. He wished he could have thermometers printed and distributed free of charge, so that every one of those present could take one home and hang it over his bed.

"Lord! and she's stolen the £20,000! How am I going to finance the whole scheme?" he groaned.

Then he wondered what his two hundred and ten islanders would do if he brought them to this music-hall. Would they just sit about with open eyes and mouths, and shout and laugh in amazement instead of smoking and chatting? Probably they would be deadly silent, and would run away at the first rising of the curtain.

A string of hilarious young people issued from the saloon bar that opened into the theatre. The orchestra played up a merry march. An arm, a long white cuff with a brass link, a white-gloved hand holding a thin baton, whipped through the air before Aaron's face like an erratic butterfly. The hilarious young people squeezed into their seats with much undignified excitement. An elderly woman seated behind Aaron said to someone:

"Look at that foreigner in front of us with a beard!"

"Sh!" came the answer. "He's an Italian, and them fellows are quick with knives."

Then the curtain rose with a hissing purr. A pink, powdered, saintly little demoiselle stood in the limelight. She was known as "The New Zealand Nightingale," and she began to sing of deceived husbands, deceived wives, and policemen in the kitchen "carrying on." (She never hinted in what way!) But if nightingales sang as she did, sparrows might be proud of their twitter. However, the fact that she came from New Zealand made up for a lot.

Aaron turned the programme. He was waiting for Jack King. He cared nothing for all the other numbers. He never noticed how much the dear public appreciated everything. They had come to be amused, and everything amused them.

The merriment seemed everlasting. The communicative elderly lady behind Aaron said:

"He don't understand a word. He never laughs."

"Sh!" came the answer again, and with it the reminder about knives.

Then came an interval, during which the dear public squeezed into the brightly-illuminated bars to quench imaginary thirst. During that time, Aaron's pulse hammered wildly. The next turn was Beelzebub, the foul betrayer of women's hearts. Aaron felt death within him. He was animated by a dumb hatred, and with all his will he tried to turn it into Christian commiseration for the misguided. Presently he was overcome by a momentary softness, which made him almost want to go and forgive the man who had stabbed him in the back. He would ask him to go on living with Victoria if that contributed to his happiness. He would show him what God was and what He demanded of His children. And he would do the same with Victoria.

The curtain went up, and the new Apollo bowed to the audience.

With dignified recognition and false shyness he smiled into the applause that thundered throughout the house.

Jack was an idol of the public, an exalted tin god among music-hall-going people. He possessed beauty and enjoyed notoriety. Aaron was astonished to hear the reception. He bit his lips very tightly and felt bitter at the idolatry of the people. It seemed to him that King enjoyed the freedom of Jupiter, whom mythology allowed to come down from his heaven to this earth when he felt bored by the goddesses, and to commit the crassest excesses and cause havoc among the beautiful females of the world.

When King said a few words to the audience, evoking peals of laughter, Aaron's mind returned to grim reality.

"Evidently that man is a favourite with the public," he thought. "His name stinks. What a crowd they must be to applaud him! How am I to show such people what God is? They will only laugh at me. Men and women who make such a man an object of admiration are not fit to hear of my celestial secrets, my ideas about purity and social reform."

Every round of applause that rained down upon the stage increased Aaron's fury against King and the public. That King should find favour with the world agonised him, and looks of fanatic distrust shot out from his deep-set eyes.

He repeatedly asked himself what he, the man of God, had to do in such a place. He began to wish that he had not come, but had gone straight to his wife to find out what had become of his money, to tell her what he thought of her.

King was under the influence of six "drops" of neat whisky. They burned in his stomach and made his eyes blaze up with unusual vitality. He had never performed so well before. His body seemed a mere human plaything governed by the will of a stranger at a distance. The execution of his tricks was of peculiar quaintness, amusing the onlookers beyond all bounds. His strength appeared extraordinary. He did his leaps, somersaults, rope-tricks with such a small amount of effort that they were almost uncanny.

Now he performed his treble somersault. Taking a run, his body leaped off the ground from a spring, curled up and shot through the air like a boomerang. He landed before the bandmaster with the grace of a fairy-queen, stroked his smooth hair with both hands, and addressed the public with gallantry.

"Any lady in this house who can perform this trick? I'll bet a hundred pounds there is not one."

The dear public thought this a good joke, and rocked in their seats. Even the blasé attendants joined in the roars of laughter that echoed through the house.

Only the orchestra remained silent.

Now came King's last trick. It was the easiest, perhaps; but at the same time it was the most showy, and the preparations for it were made with all the devices of an artful stage-manager. A huge scaffold was erected amid the studious silence of the onlookers, and a bar was suspended from it by wires. The arrangement looked dangerously precarious and was minutely inspected both by King and the stage-manager, who put on his most serious face and informed the ladies and gentlemen, with a look of grave responsibility, that Mr. King was the only man on God's earth who could suspend himself

by the toes of either foot and swing to and fro like a pendulum fifteen feet above the ground, and at the same time drink a glass of real Dublin stout. When he mentioned the Dublin stout, King put on a green cap, which caused a new fit of laughter in the house. Then silence came at last; King made a sign to the bandmaster and turned to his work. The orchestra struck a bombastic chord that sounded like the trumpets of the Judgment Day and was prolonged indefinitely. Blue and green limelights flashed on the performer, who had stripped of his leopard skin and now, dressed in pink *tricot*, leaped on to the bar.

Complete silence.

He dropped backwards, hanging upside down by the toes of his left foot, his face turning red. He waited for the glass of stout before beginning his swing, and meanwhile his glassy eyes wandered over the audience seated in the stalls.

During King's performance Aaron was attacked by cold shivers which ran through his body to his extremities. His hands became moist. It was not the performance which excited him, but a strange and terrible power which he felt within himself. He thought King might die, might somehow get killed at any moment. He thought that he could contribute towards this happening by using his power. And suddenly there came to him the will to make King die. That will increased with every moment. It filled him with sinister certainty. It made him clench his fists so hard that his horny nails cut through his gloves. It spoke out of his eyes with unnatural force. He said in his mind: "I will him to fall on his head; I will him to loosen his toes. I will it. You must fall. Do you hear?"

Just then King looked into Aaron's eyes, which were fixed upon him with strange, horrible intentness. The acrobat made a sudden jerk. Sweat broke out on Aaron's forehead. King's toes straightened, then slipped from the suspended bar. He dropped like a log and crashed on to the stage. There was the crack of a breaking bone. For an instant the fallen figure remained with its legs up perpendicularly, balancing on its face. Then the legs came down like sledge hammers on to the boards.

The audience was bewildered. A new trick, of course!

Some applauded, others whispered. Others, who knew that no man could fall in that way without hurt, got up in a terrible excitement that turned their stomachs to gaze at the prostrate athlete. All had happened too suddenly to be realised. Some women fainted; others shrieked. The curtain purred down quickly and whipped up a cloud of dust into the footlights. The bandmaster tapped his baton on the music-desk, shouted to the orchestra left and right, tapped the baton again . . . again. And suddenly a frantic pot-boiler set up like a hurricane, fortissimo! a mad race between fiddles, horns, bassoons and 'cellos, all trying to catch each other up with weird haste, only to be lashed on into more hurry by a terrified baton.

The stage-manager appeared before the curtain, looking like a corpse in the first stages of decomposition. There was a strung-up, gasping silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, with the gestures of a wound-up puppet. "The management regrets that an accident has happened. It hopes that Mr. King will survive his great misfortune. I am sure we all sympathise with him. Is there perchance a medical practitioner in the house who would kindly oblige by coming round to the stage to see Mr. King?"

There was a deep, mournful silence, which was broken by whispers, and some awe-stricken, acid-like monkey noises, that sounded like over-emphasized short "tz's," coming especially from women in all parts of the house. But there was no doctor to respond.

Feeling that he could not sit still for another moment without bursting into a loud shout, Aaron rose up. The stage-manager looked relieved and pointed his black-nailed forefinger at him. Fifteen hundred pairs of eyes were at once focussed on Aaron, as if he were the saviour of the world, and followed him with manifest gratitude whilst he walked solemnly out. The communicative lady who sat behind his stall said:

"He looks like a foreign doctor, doesn't he? Tz! I wonder if he'll get him right?"

"Sht!" came the retort, in a whisper. "Don't talk so loud. I thought all the time he was a scientist."

"Tz! Tz!" repeated the lady. "I feel so sorry for him. He's such a nice-looking young man."

A black shadow hovered before Aaron's eyes, and he had to use all his energy in order to keep himself upright. When an attendant buttonholed him and said: "Come this way, sir," he could not even find words to explain that he wasn't a doctor, but let himself be led passively through a small iron door on to the stage, then across the stage to where performers and stage-hands clustered together in awe-stricken little circles; whilst the next turn was going on as if nothing had happened.

A policeman then came up to Aaron, who shuddered when he saw him. "This way, sir," he said, and guided him along a corridor that looked like a rabbit-warren. They came to an open door, where two men stood whispering. Three people were inside the room, kneeling by Jack King, who was covered with his leopard skin.

Aaron could not speak. Violent emotions robbed him of the power. But he made gestures that meant nothing. Those present, however, thought them to be his bedside manner, and cleared the room.

The policeman peeped in for a moment and said:

"I've telephoned for the ambulance."

Then Aaron was left alone with Jack King.

The athlete was pale, writhing in half-conscious agony. Some kind soul had already administered brandy to him, another had poured cold water over his head. But it had been of no use. His head was hanging backward over a cushion which had been pushed under his shoulders. His Adam's apple protruded unnaturally and moved up and down in his vain attempts to swallow. His eyes rolled and twisted like those of a dying bullock. He seemed utterly void of all power of movement, and through his half-closed lips came a sickly gurgling sound.

The chords of the orchestra were audible from a distance, and added a singular note of tragedy to the death-like quiet in the acrobat's dressing-room.

Aaron leaned against a rickety table, hardly able to sustain

his body. A dull film coated his eyes. He looked inanimate, like a stoic murderer who feels the noose around his bare neck. He feared lest the ground upon which he stood should open under his feet and swallow him up.

Dying King rolled his eyes at him in despair. Aaron pulled himself together violently. Should he speak to him? What could he say?

When the acrobat's eyes rested on him for a moment, Aaron longed to run out of the room like a madman. A wave of feverish anxiety for the other's life rushed over him. Suddenly he became his brother, a man who loved him, for whose life he cared, whose death would break his heart.

A minute passed.

The ambulance would come presently.

They would find out that he was not a doctor.

He closed his eyes to collect his thoughts in momentary darkness.

"Shall I die?" asked King, in a hoarse, miserable voice.

Aaron fell down on his knees beside him.

"No, of course not," he said, in colourless tones. "You shall live."

"You remind me—you do," said King, showing the whites of his eyes. "But you aren't—or—are you?"

"I am! I am!" groaned Aaron. "It's I who killed you. I—I!"

There was a long pause.

King tried in vain to swallow. Then he spoke, with his mouth full of saliva.

"No—she did—tell her—she—did—not you. Drink—she—but tell her—I—never—loved any woman—like her. Tell her——"

"Yes, yes," cried Aaron.

The room turned round before his eyes. King's face suddenly seemed to have grown disproportionately large. Aaron thought it came nearer and nearer towards him, as if to swallow him up. The whites of the eyes turned red, pink, all colours.

"Yes, yes, I will tell her," grunted Aaron, just as hoarse as the other man.

King did not speak again. He moved his head left and right helplessly. Aaron put his hand under the acrobat's neck to lift him up a little. He heard a little snap and felt a bone tap him on his palm.

King gave a sigh and died.

Aaron was petrified, and gazed dementedly on the dead face, in which the eyes moved up and down mechanically and for a long time would not keep still. He dropped the head on the couch and sprang to his feet.

"Great God in Heaven! I ask you to take his soul. I command you, let me suffer in his stead! Do you hear me?" prayed Aaron, whilst his hair stood upright. "Cast my soul into hell! But take his—I beg of you, God."

He looked fanatical. His eyes became clear and shining.

"My God hears me," he murmured to himself. "He listens to the voice of all."

Then he crossed his forearms and pushed both his hands into the wide arms of his overcoat, a gesture that gave him the appearance of a monk. His forehead contracted in deep wrinkles. His eyebrows sank down almost hiding his eyes. For a moment he stared at the athlete, whose muscles were already setting tight in death. Then he opened the door and made a movement of despair with his shoulders to the policeman and the other men outside.

They came in quickly.

"It's all up," said the policeman, taking off his helmet. "Poor old boy! I'm sure we all feel sorry for him."

The corpse-like stage-manager and the other commiserators said nothing, but glared at the dead figure as if they had never known it alive, as if they had nothing at all in common or to do with it.

When the ambulance arrived, the uncanny doctor had evaporated, and throwing to the wind all his previous resolutions and his business, he took the night train back to London.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Victoria was awaiting the return of her lover. It had taken her fully five minutes to realise that she was lying on the carpet of her bedroom. When she did so, she

put her hand to her jaw and rose up with a tired groan. She dragged herself towards the bed, flung herself upon it, and cried. Her pale cheeks were quickly overrun with a crimson flush expressing all the indignation, humiliation and feverish hatred of which she was capable.

"Never, never will I sit down under this!" she groaned, and bit her teeth into the linen of the bed that still smelt of a wholesome laundry. Thus she remained for a considerable time; then with her hands on her breasts, walked slowly to a looking-glass and studied herself intently. There was a bruise on her chin which she immediately smothered with powder. She took a sniff from a bottle of smelling-salts, but put it down in disgust; rubbed her forehead and the back of her head with *eau-de-cologne*, and then let herself drop into an arm-chair, where she sat with her eyes fixed upon the distant fire, still as a statue.

She began to scheme in her mind. For a while she thought of her lover's razor. How easily she could cut his throat with it while he was asleep! Then she would be free from his companionship and his spells of the animal, and it would serve him right. What had she to hope for from life? It was only a question of time until all the money she could lay hands on would be spent. Then she would be left without money, without friends, even without Jack.

Would it not be better to apply a razor to her own throat and cut a deep gash into it at once? All would then be over for ever. Her thoughts went to Aaron.

"What am I to do?" she thought presently. "I cannot sit here and wait for Jack's return and then submit again to his infernal love. I will pack up my things at once, go to another hotel, or go back to London, retire to my flat and keep all faces shut off from me. I'm sick of human faces. I'll buy a lap dog or a monkey and have it to live with me. And then—Jack will come and pester me again, and when I have missed him for a week or two I shall be weak and let him in, and then the old humdrum business will begin once more. What shall I do?"

Her head ached and hummed from the blow. She took another sniff at the salts. Then she continued her meditations.

"Life is so horribly empty. It's hardly worth living. Damn it!"

Here she arrived at a dead end in her reflections, and the beginning of a vast blank in her soul, wherein she could find no consolation, no encouragement. Her mind felt as dry as a lemon peel in the sun. She was a worthless creature with not enough soil on which to grow even a thistle, and for once she was conscious of it.

She was now back in the state of mind that had tortured her when she had gazed through the window at the streets in desperation and had seen nothing but death.

Presently tears came again to her eyes. She began to pity herself. She had done no harm to any one. Aaron had wanted to go away from her, and surely he could not expect her to live like a nun during his absence? She was not born to resist man's conquering will and desires. Men had fallen in love with her, loved her passionately. And she had loved them in return. But they had never stuck to her, never persevered. Was that her fault, or theirs? Who had been badly treated, she, or they? She had been.

Men were unjust, selfish, brutal, and had used her only to wipe their feet on. For a while she reviewed them all in her mind and her tears increased. Of all men she suddenly cared most for Aaron. She loved him even at that moment. She knew him better than any of the others, and he had always treated her kindly. What would he say if he knew? Victoria began to regret.

The more she thought about Aaron, the more she wished that she had never known Jack. It would have been worth her while to stay in her flat alone, knitting stockings, and waiting for his return. She now thought it might have been a sweet moment when the stormy seafarer had arrived, when he had taken her in his arms and said: "Vic, darling, I'm back again with you. Thank God for it." That could not be now, for the money was gone and he would find that out anyhow.

She began to shiver from head to foot, and went over to the fireside, dragging her feet over the carpet. She looked absolutely worn out. All had come too late in her life, even

the consciousness of her own worthlessness. What was left to her but to sit and stare, with lifeless, loveless patience, and wait—wait?

* * * * *

Two days had passed, yet in spite of Aaron's secret calculations Mrs. West had not returned to her flat in Albert Hall Mansions. On the second day Aaron learned from Betty that Mrs. West had sent a wire in which she requested that her bed should be made up and a few things got ready for her arrival.

In the meantime Aaron was busy and had to keep his legs on the move to retain control of all the intricate strings of his life. His movements expressed nervous anxiety. He paid spasmodic visits to Mr. Graham, his solicitor, and also to his bank; and whilst the hours of the two days seemed to pass in feverish hurry, a growing feeling of despair began to assail him from which he vainly tried to escape. Fate had struck two hard blows at him. No. 1, the deception of his wife; No. 2, the disappearance of the greater part of his fortune. Small wonder that Aaron felt feverish and went about his business with clenched fists.

First of all, at his bank the manager had told him that the Metropolitan Stock standing in his wife's name had been sold by her order two days after his leaving England. A cheque for the whole amount had been drawn at the time by Mrs. West and the money placed in another bank. At that point Aaron had rushed off to Birmingham. The next revelation had been a pass-book in a drawer of his wife's dressing-table, which he had found after he had rushed back to London. That pass-book had told him more than the shifty memory of his wife would have remembered.

Twenty thousand and odd pounds stood out in bold solitude on the credit side of the book and were carried forward from page to page with desolate significance. The debit side looked black. Nice round sums, such as five hundreds, two hundreds, hundreds, fifties, twenties, tens, stared out of the lines, and were made out to all sorts of firms, hotels, companies, syndicates, unknown to Aaron; or to private people,

among whom the name of Jack King figured significantly. Aaron was horror-stricken. Not even the three thousand pounds which she had paid to his solicitor to settle for the Island deal consoled him. Finally he drew the balance on a slip of paper. There were barely two thousand pounds left!

"God Almighty!" cried Aaron in despair. "Fifteen thousand pounds she has spent on herself, that woman. In one year! Twelve months—three hundred and sixty-five days! £15,000—good, right-down precious money that belonged to me and God!"

He groaned, his head sank down on his arms and tears came into his eyes.

"What will become of my islanders now? What of God's holy mission? Where are the funds to come from now? Seven thousand pounds left out of the lot I possessed once. My God!"

The blow was terrible.

Neither his solicitor nor his banker was able to suggest to Aaron a way to recover the great mass of vanished sovereigns. No amount of hatred or violence could bring the money back to him. The loss shook his nature to its foundations.

He left the "place of sin," seething with rage, the pass-book in his breast pocket. He went to his wife's banker's, and there he was told by a hard-faced cashier that he could not draw the balance of Mrs. West's account without her signature. He returned forthwith to the "place of sin" and dug out scattered handfuls of receipted accounts and bills, among which was a receipt for a fur coat, at the bottom of which he read, "Received with thanks the sum of £1,000."

"One thousand pounds for a fur coat—with thanks!" cried Aaron. "My God! and Somna has hardly got a rag to her skin. My islanders walk about in rat-skins and palm-fans."

He was roused to a rage against Victoria that surpassed all bounds. King's death became a mere paltry occurrence of daily life in comparison with the appalling squandering of his property, God's property. He thought he could drag every limb from that woman's body, could tear the hair from her scalp and flog her.

Later, when he walked down Oxford Street, Aaron was

so obsessed with fury that his steps were like a drunkard's and people went out of his way as if he were a dog seized with the rabies. For twenty-four hours he could not take food, and at the end of that period he slipped into a side-street chop-house, sat down next to a cab-driver, who moved a good distance away from him, and ordered a cup of tea and a bun.

When he came out he cursed the well-to-do issuing from a famous West End restaurant with the flush of rich food and wine upon their cheeks, and grunted savagely: "Your God is your stomach. You're on the road to hell, the lot of you."

Then he walked back to the flat to hear if Mrs. West had come home, or if there were any news from her. Betty handed him a telegram. "Arrive to-morrow evening eight o'clock. Light bedroom fire." Aaron smiled, grunted, looked ferocious, and his eyebrows went up and down.

"I'll light her bedroom fire," he grunted.

Betty, with much ingenuity, suggested that Mr. West perhaps ought to take another walk. Thereupon Aaron tapped her on the shoulder and said: "You're a loyal little soul, Betty. She's coming to-morrow evening at eight. I want to get the place empty before then. You might begin packing a few private things of mine." Then he went out to his house-agent, gave notice that he wished to vacate his flat as soon as possible, and asked the man to arrange immediately for a sale of all his furniture. A few hours later, several men, Jews and Christians, called upon Betty and asked to see the furniture that was for immediate sale.

"Mr. West is out," Betty explained.

"We've got orders to view," they insisted. And they came in in rotation, with different faces, different manners, yet all with the same sort of expression in their eyes. Some of them viewed and went away; but two remained, in order to wait for Mr. West. Aaron returned, hot and excited. He had found a new and cheaper flat in St. John's Mews; three rooms and a kitchen, furnished, over a gentleman's coach-house, with a view into the stable-yard. Price, twelve shillings a week.

"This is Mr. West," said Betty to the two gentlemen.

They got up quickly. Their behaviour indicated that there was a rivalry between them. Each wished to get the first interview with Mr. West.

"What is the matter?" inquired Aaron.

"Messrs. So-and-so telephoned through that you wished to sell your furniture in a hurry."

"Well?"

"I can make you an offer. I am agent for——"

"I'm an independent buyer," interrupted the other.

"Well, what about it?" inquired Aaron.

"I offer you——"

"And I offer you——"

There followed a considerable silence. They both offered——

"Well?" Aaron inquired again.

Neither of the two gentlemen wanted to mention a figure.

Aaron looked at them sharply. To him they appeared like hungry beasts, come to fall upon him in his misery and to seize his property. He forgot that he had indirectly invited them to come, and feeling that each was there to "do" him if possible—Betty meanwhile looking on anxiously—he became ferocious and said:

"I don't see what you two fellows want. You don't seem able to make up your minds. This isn't an auction room. Get out of my flat—out of it!"

The two gentlemen suddenly became friends and kept in close touch with each other. They groped for their hats and went out side by side, without once taking their eyes off Aaron, or making another offer.

Betty shut the door behind them, and Aaron said to her:

"Can't you see that they are thieves and don't even know their business? They are both on the road to hell."

"I thought so, Mr. West," replied Betty. "But there have been more gentlemen here. One has written a letter to you and left it."

"Well, Betty," said Aaron, "we're going to leave this place of sin. I've taken less-sought-after lodgings, and if you will come with me, I shall be glad. But it will be very simple, remember. Now, where is that letter?"

She gave it to him. He read it. It was signed by a representative of a great furnishing concern, who suggested an appointment with Mr. West to discuss matters. Aaron asked Betty to telephone him and ask him to come that night. So it came about that on the following day Aaron's furniture was sold, and he was handed a cheque for eight hundred pounds by the representative of a great business house, who had the appearance of a learned politician. A little later his house-agent introduced a colonel and his wife to Mr. West. They had come from India and wanted diggings. The colonel and his wife liked Mr. West's flat, and took it from the end of the month onwards. Then the packers of the great business house arrived, and by evening the flat was empty. Only three boxes were left behind to be transferred to St. John's Mews.

Late in the evening Aaron walked up and down the empty rooms among the straw and paper left behind by the packers. Betty looked on sorrowfully, holding in her hand a bag stuffed with her own precious things, and her master said:

"Now the devil has swept the place of sin. Let her come! Let her come! You go to St. John's Mews, Betty, and get things ready. For once you can take a cab. But take these boxes with you. It will save money."

Betty went away to her new future, and looked loyally into Mr. West's eyes before she shut the door. The noise of the shutting door sounded hollow and strange through the empty rooms where Aaron was left alone to wait for his wife's return.

The nearer eight o'clock came, the colder became Aaron in body and in mind. He leaned against one of the windows of the empty flat, and looked out into the dark brown fog that weighed down over London. Lights shone through it from quite close by, but they seemed far off, and in their dull shine was neither hope, comfort nor happiness. In this strange solitude Aaron became aware that such things did not exist for him: he was seized with a longing to be active, to throw himself into the one thing that now mattered to him: his great, divine call. How was he going to follow it? What guarantee had he that it would be successful? His own

life? . . . If the past life of a man was the key to his future, then Aaron's future was doomed to failure.

From time to time he wandered through the empty rooms, switched on the lights in rotation and then plunged his surroundings back into darkness again. He needed no light to remind him of the past. Pain and sinful rage told him tales which the walls might have told had they not been mute. Once or twice he walked to the door, thinking he heard the hollow sound of footsteps. He considered whether he had not better disappear from the ghastly place, and go home to St. John's Mews, and sit with Betty over the gentleman's coach-house, listening to the gentleman's grooms fetching water for the horses. The rattling of their buckets, the water running from the taps would be more pleasant music than the sound of this lonely tramp, tramp over a squeaking, dusty, parquet floor in "the place of sin." And for whom was he waiting? For her? To tell her what he thought of her? Perhaps lose his temper and kill her? "Not I!" he whispered, looking round frightened, fancying he heard King fall from his trapeze. . . . "Not I!"

What was he waiting for then? Could she not come here alone and in empty loneliness continue to weep over that dead fellow of hers?

"Come on!" Aaron encouraged himself. "You have resolved to part from her, but you've got to get the balance of your money. Don't be weak at the last moment. Come on!"

"She has been a deceiver all her life. Don't you get caught in her net again. Cut her, cut the losses of your precious money, but get back what you can."

Presently a key was applied to the hall door, which was opened, and some one entered the flat. There was a sound of tired, dragging footsteps, and a light was switched on. Some one uttered an astonished cry, and went out again as if to make sure of something. Then the person returned saying:

"It is my flat! Whatever——"

"That's she!" thought Aaron. But for the old shallow sigh following her words he would hardly have thought it was Victoria.

Suddenly she called out, "Betty!"

Her voice echoed coldly through the rooms, but no Betty answered. Her surprise increased to fright; her dragging feet became active; and she went from room to room, switching on all the lights. She made various ejaculations. Finally she came to the doorway of the room where Aaron was waiting for her. She saw him, and suddenly stood still as if fixed to the ground with screws.

He looked so strange, with his dark, short beard and his deeply bronzed skin, that she muttered:

"Is it you, Aaron?"

"Yes!" he said, wondering if that white-faced, haggard woman with her hat stuck on to her disordered hair at a strange angle could be the wife whom he had once loved and trusted. He half closed his eyelids to take in her full picture, to convince himself that she really was Victoria. And she was—although she had little in common with the Victoria of his imaginative memory.

Victoria had realised by now that something extraordinary was in store for her, that this might perhaps be her last hour, and she cursed herself for having been fool enough to fall into a trap. Then she wondered if perhaps some secret force had not driven her back. Her life seemed to be entirely given over to a process of humiliation, from which she was unable to escape. Undoubtedly she was going to be knocked about again; but this time by her husband. She dropped her snake-skin handbag on the floor, turned a shade whiter, began to squint a little, and said:

"What does all this mean? Where is our home?"

"That is what I should like to know," said Aaron. "Where is it? What have you done to it?"

"I? I?" replied Victoria, with an increasing squint. "I've only been away for a few days at the sea-side. I left it all in order, and Betty was here. Where is it all now?"

Aaron forced a laugh.

"Exceedingly well you look for your trip to the sea-side," he replied. "It's always the sea-side. I found you at the sea-side. The same old packet of lies. You're nothing but lies, and you've even infected that maid, Betty, with them."

Betty! He put special stress on the name, and Victoria, catching the meaning of "Betty," began to smile, as a burglar might smile when the handcuffs are put on him.

"Yes, Betty—of course, Betty!" she replied, and seemed quickly to resign herself to the new situation. "Of course, Betty has told him everything!" she thought. "There is no escape. What do I care? All things come to an end in life. Why should not I?"

"Miserable creature!" said Aaron, with no attempt to control his loathing for her. "There you stand, squinting and lying like the devil, to the last moment. Not a word of regret! Nothing! Nothing! And I stand here and wait for you for hours, only to be told more lies. You rotten creature!"

He tore her bank-book from his pocket with passionate violence.

"See that? Stop that squinting business, or else I'll go sick. That's your doing, all your doing."

He opened the book, held it in one hand, hammered on it with the back of the other, and went on:

"Five hundred, hundreds, thousands! All gone to the devil for you. All damn good money! All money that does not belong to either of us, but to God. Lord! and you've thrown it out of the window! A thousand pounds for a fur coat!"—Aaron almost shrieked the figure—"a thousand pounds spent to cover a miserable, scraggy body like yours! Explain that, woman!"

He paused, swallowed violently, and went on:

"For what you've done to yourself I don't care a damn. But my money, my money! It was all needed for a definite purpose, and it has all gone. Oh!"

He thrust out both fists towards her, then turned away and walked towards the window, holding up both hands, the bank-book in one of them. With abject despair he exclaimed:

"There she stands squinting, and all my money gone!"

For a moment he stood still and thought, then took out his pocket-case and drew out a blank cheque form.

"Two thousand pounds left out of twenty thousand. Fifteen thousand you've squandered, made away with for good!

God forgive you! Here! Sign this cheque! Not another penny of my money shall you spend. Sign, I say! Do you hear?"

He presented her with the cheque form and a pen.

"There! sign it against the wall," he grunted, "with your hands all of a tremble."

She took the paper and signed her name on it against the wall.

"Needn't tremble so much, woman," Aaron added with ferocity. "He's broken his neck. He isn't coming here any more. And I'm going."

He folded the cheque and put it in his pocket.

A minute later he passed by her through the doorway, his hat on his head. He pulled on his gloves. His fury died down and a strange tremble was in his voice as he said:

"You can do as you like now. I'm seeing the last of you, and will try to forget that you're my wife. I've sold everything, and for that you have yourself to blame."

He opened the door, saying as he did so:

"The pitcher goes to the well until it breaks."

Then he shut the door and walked down the stairs, talking to himself under his breath.

Chapter XXI

Aaron's campaign was in full swing.

London, a small world of its own, has an outlet for pain-ridden men and women who wish to take advantage of the right of freedom of speech to tell the world what ought to be. That outlet is the public park, the open-air university, to which all the world-correctors are driven by a mystic force, where all their shouts can mingle with the wind that rattles the King's trees during the seasons of dust and mist, of sunshine and rain.

This was the twenty-first day of January, a Sunday; and for the twentieth time Aaron had ascended a pair of collapsible steps, brought along from St. John's Mews by regen-

erated Betty, in order that "dear, inspired Mr. West" might rise above the average public with whom he had so little in common. Betty thought it was exceedingly brave of Mr. West to face hundreds of people whom the January sun had melted out of their beds; and she was very proud of herself, for she played an active part in Captain Aaron West's campaign. Indeed, Betty, looking up at Aaron on his steps and remembering that twenty days ago Mr. West had begun his work for God with nothing but the pair of steps from St. John's Mews and herself, was highly pleased. Now she was an advanced student of his schemes, and stood a fair chance of one day becoming his general manageress.

Sunday people began to gather, like wasps round a jam-pot, and there was a mysterious movement among their throng, such as an eel makes in shallow water. Aaron followed the movement with glowing eyes.

His five little boys were at their work, scrambling about the legs of the adult people, and freely distributing Aaron West thermometers, printed in black and blue on yellow cardboard. Aaron's five little boys possessed many-sided natures and their duties were manifold. Their first and chief one concerned a large canvas, twenty feet long and four feet wide, that was housed in the gentleman's coach-house, with the consent of the gentleman's groom, at a cost to Aaron of one shilling a week. On the smooth side of the canvas a gigantic thermometer was painted in oil; but it was only an enlargement of the smaller pattern. Now the five little boys knew all about Mr West's thermometers. They studied the weather in view of the possibility of their master speaking in the open Park, and rambled about the gentleman's coach-house and stables, working in, on the sly, two or three pence a day from strangers, apart from the salary of five shillings a week which they received from Mr. West every Saturday evening. When Betty came downstairs with the collapsible steps, the five little boys would holloa out for each other and come running from all directions and nowhere in particular, like dwarfs in a fairy tale; and they were so agile and clever that after an apprenticeship of less than a week they contrived to lift the giant thermometer upon their heads without

grown-up assistance, and to walk off by themselves in the direction of the Park, always visualising the stern gaze of their bearded master. That giant thermometer now stood up against a tree behind the steps, forming the background of Aaron's *mise en scène* for his singular sermons. It also served as his backbone, and somehow when standing by it he had a feeling of safety. If there was an eye, a mouth, or a whole person among the crowd objecting, remonstrating, arguing, or even trying to upset him, he fixed his eyes on the canvas and then new strength came into his heart, new ideas came pouring into his head, and his will to conquer the Evil One and evil in general flamed up anew. Then he swung his stick through the air with violence, forgetting where he was and to whom he was talking, and that the stick itself was only intended for the peaceful purpose of pointing out on the canvas the various degrees of good and bad.

Aaron waited until the little boys had worked their way through the crowds diagonally and circumferentially. When that was done, Johnnie, the senior boy, eight years of age, was supposed to yell. In the meantime, the public were supposed to study the cardboard thermometers, and indeed everybody was plunged for a moment into reflection while reading the lines printed on the back: "Invented by Captain Aaron West. Hang it over your sinful bed and think a bit." There was a sting in the last sentence that pricked them all alike and touched upon their privacy. That being a sore point with humanity, everybody was at once upon the defensive; everybody at once registered a silent protest against the word "sinful."

There was no doubt that Aaron's thermometer possessed secret powers; especially the giant one on the canvas which fascinated even ladies and gentlemen of fashion. From a distance it looked like a great ladder and suggested climbing up, going up towards some unknown height.

This special attraction, however, filled the hearts of other Hyde-Park-world-correctors with jealousy and drove them on to the limit of their exertions.

A little man with a floating white beard, and a long red nose that permanently distilled crystal drops, who preached

Socialism fifty yards away from Aaron, organised a regular revolution against the new-comer and his canvas. He put the whole force of his personality into his voice, which rose higher every day, like a mill-stream in a summer downpour, and many times came to flooding point. Yet, in spite of his counterblast, his audience would go away and be fascinated by "that bearded humbug," as he finally called Aaron publicly.

Johnnie, who with peculiar sagacity and a firm belief in his master's greatness quickly learned the politics of the Park, came running to his master one day, saying:

"Mr. West, that old man's called you a bearded hummin' bug!"

Aaron showed his snow-white, regular teeth, and replied:

"Run, sonny! Give him a thermometer with my compliments for the advertisement."

Johnnie ran.

Aaron's principal competitor, however, was a long, square-jawed, round-shouldered, lethargic American gentleman, with side-whiskers of clay-soil colour and a bald head from which the sunbeams scattered as from a piece of brass. His voice was snappy and snarling, like a circular saw cutting trees in a wood. He possessed no attractions apart from himself, and always stood on the same spot, summer and winter, and arrived at the same minute of the day. His regularity was the foundation of his success.

He began his discourse while still alone. Arrived at his "pitch," he folded up his cap and put it in his pocket. Then he drew out a roll of paper and his circular saw began.

"Ladies and gennelmen"—an important cough—"Ladies and gennelmen"—another cough. When he had repeated this twenty or thirty times, the ladies and gentlemen did truly arrive, and where there are ten in London, there will soon be fifty, a hundred or more. The American gentleman's chief subject of conversation was the modern science of Christ, the healing theory of the Saviour, based only on faith, called forth by the powers of the human will. He talked good sense and had good faith in himself. Faith surpasses reason, and being therefore the more powerful, it is the more attractive, and often lures the very person who has none. It is the only

argument for spiritual existence that fully satisfies what reason condemns. This dogma the American used as a diving-board for his sermons, applying faith in a physical sense. He told the crowds that if they had faith they could overcome obstacles of any kind, such as mountains, toothache, and paralysis. He spoke with an open mind, invited argument and was often heckled. His ready wit got him out of hot water many times; and many times he triumphed over his attackers.

Now it came about that the American gentleman noticed that his crowds began to diminish, and that the bearded new-comer's congregation swelled in proportion. He bore Aaron no ill-will, but set about to ask himself what could be the reason for the change. He could not make it out. He strained every nerve to conquer the opposition, yet he failed. Faith and healing power no longer seemed to attract the public as they had heretofore. He argued with himself and in time felt bitterness against Aaron. And in the end his feelings had to come out and he said one day, talking about himself: "*I am but a poor man. Christ was poor, and yet the people of the world listened to him. They will not listen to me. Why not? I have no money to back up my enterprise, I cannot even afford to paint for you on canvas what faith means.*" When he had ended his speech and the few listeners had dispersed, he stood alone for a while looking with envy at the dense crowds gathered around the "ladder," and presently a cunning look came into his eyes which, after a while, gradually changed to an expression of mental satisfaction. Just then a clergyman walked up to him, greeted him genially, and said: "I come from Cornwall, and am staying in London for a week. I have been taking walks here in my leisure time, and have often listened to you and to him." He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at Aaron.

"Very flattering, sir, to know that," replied the American.

"No, indeed not," the clergyman assured him, with a sniff that showed he was suffering from a cold. "But I think it is very interesting how some of you good people try to uplift humanity. That man"—he pointed again with his thumb—

"has great success, and is highly original, though somewhat fanatical."

The American looked at the Cornishman sideways.

"Oh, I don't mean that you are not original," the clergyman hastened to say. "You certainly are. You are most fair in your speeches and accept criticism as a high mind should do. I do not want to express an opinion about either of you" (the thumb worked again), "but it seems to me that he" (the thumb remained in Aaron's direction) "follows a similar line to you; except, perhaps, that you show what faith might do to a body, provided one had the powers that, of course, only Christ possessed; whereas he shows what faith can do to a soul, which is the immortal part in us."

The American gentleman's eyes were fixed hard upon Aaron, who was just then running up and down the ladder with a stick. The clergyman sniffed and took the opportunity to extricate himself, saying (whilst step by step getting away from the American), "It is indeed gratifying to see people uplifted in the free air of God. Good-bye."

Thereupon he retreated down an alley, applying a large coloured handkerchief to his face and blowing his nose with fervour.

The American, having been inspired by a new idea and therefore feeling placid, made for little Aaron's crowd to listen to Aaron who was in the act of "winding up." Immediately a thermometer was pressed into his hand by a little boy who had a pile of them under his arm. The American slipped it into his pocket and then listened attentively.

"Now then," shouted Aaron, "before you go home, all you people, once more let me run up and down this thermometer. Here"—he tapped with his stick where it said "cold"—"this is the high-water mark between the streams of good and bad. Here the life of your soul starts, here the atmospheric conditions of your everyday life begin. Here you must stand still and consider whether your inclinations make for good or for evil. Either way is open to you, and up you go to God, or down you go towards hell. Once more, for your enlightenment, let me tell you the degrees of the downward path so that you may fully understand them. We start from

the beginning of the life of the soul—here—‘cold.’” He pointed it out again. “Downward path degree: Lunatics, hypocrites. The question whether lunatics are nearer to God than I put them is open to argument.” (Laughter.) “I dare say they think they are” (laughter), “but as their souls are undoubtedly not normal, I put them below normal. Hypocrites! A man who has two cows and pretends he has none is a hypocrite; a man who pretends to others at all is a hypocrite and a self-made fool; therefore same degree as a lunatic.” (Laughter.) “Hypocrisy is passive dishonesty, and leads immediately to active dishonesty. There we’ve got it.” (The stick went to it.) “If a man who has two cows which give eight gallons of milk each day, manages to sell eighteen gallons a day, he is actively and passively dishonest. And all dishonesty is dishonest.” (Loud laughter.) “It is caused by the love of money. Here, a degree lower. If that same man sells his eighteen gallons of milk at double the money that others do——” (A voice: “He probably would if he could, I dare say.”) (Laughter.) Aaron: “You’ve got it.” (Cheers.) (Another voice: “I’d be a damn fool to buy it from him.”)

Aaron smiled, showing his rows of white teeth, and several times made an effort to restore order. At last he continued:

“Good people, I am glad to see you all happy. But now let us be serious. You can follow the downward path yourselves. Selfishness, all selfishness, is the cause of evil. It lies in the centre of all sins. What does man do when he has gratified all selfish aims? He sets out to destroy, to destroy others, destroy the world, and very often he destroys himself. Why? Because there is no end to his selfish greed. He must have more, until the world is under his hand. And woe to the world unless that man be led by stronger and better influences than his own to things that transform the evil powers of his soul into goodness. Selfishness, dishonesty, love of money, will to destroy, are immoral. But in dealing with immorality, as set out on my thermometer, I apply the term only to sexual immorality. It is exactly here where the civilised world shows its intimacy with the devil. The before-

mentioned passions are closely connected with it. And I say it flourishes among us and is more evident than the green of the grass in this Park. Ruthlessly it shows its face everywhere, and has wound its way like a snake into all circles of civilised society. It flourishes here in our very midst. We must stamp it out." (Voice: "That's what the Bishop of London says.") Aaron: "Then for once he is right!" (Laughter and applause.) (Same voice: "Then why don't you do anything to better it yourself?") (Another voice: "You can't, you're not better yourself.") Aaron, grimly: "I see I have stung you, my friend, and if you'll wait a while, I'll show you the way." (General assent.)

Aaron: "It is weakness to say you can't stamp it out. It is the preaching of the devil that says you can't. Whenever a great thing is to be done, the devil says: 'You can't.' But I say to you and to all: 'You can,' and not only that, but 'You must.' The evil must be rooted out, bit by bit, with patience and understanding, or else there will be hell in this world. . . . Hell!" (Murmurs, laughter, assent.)

Aaron took a deep breath, looked down upon Betty, who was holding the steps for safety's sake, then turned his eyes back to the canvas, and continued:

"I must apologise, good people, for keeping you here so long, but as I have shown you the way to hell, it is only fair that I should show you the other way." (Laughter.) "I am quite aware that I am doing it in a strange manner, but I am convinced that it is the right one. Let me sum up, starting from 'cold' upwards. Animals I separate from association with evil, I put them a degree higher than idiots and lunatics. They certainly are not able to object." (Laughter.) "Alongside the animals are the indifferent. He who is indifferent can be made different. I assume that the difference will be in an upward way. It may, of course, be downward, but I hope it won't. Hope contains sympathy and is therefore a good quality." (Voice: "What about . . ." is shouted down.) "Now, if every one of you was born with common-sense——" (Voice: "What about yourself?" Several voices: "Shut up, you——") "with common-sense in you," Aaron continued, unperturbed, "and was educated to nothing else but to make

use of that great gift, I should not stand here and talk." (Loud laughter.) "I hope *I* have got some, at any rate. I speak of ordinary common-sense." (More laughter.) "I venture to say that in that case many of us would not do what we do do." (Voice: "What *we* do do, that's better.")

Aaron, sternly: "Then every one of you could see the consequences of evil, and practise but good qualities, be truthful, honest and pure. But it is not so, therefore you need help to make it so. And I say, there is no better, no other help than the love of God; the only true God, not the God whom people like to make, but the God who is and has been before people could make Him. But to love God needs divine faith, and that you must find within your own hearts, for it comes out of yourselves and cannot be stuffed into you like food. I dwell on this point, as it is most important. No amount of thinking can bring faith. Thought destroys it in its infancy. Only when it comes to us as a revelation and its powers seize us, transform us, do we know it and recognise it. And then, what happens then?" (Aaron was in ecstasy, his eyes shot lightning flashes.) "Then we come into contact with the glorious qualities that build up humanity. We are ready to become unselfish, to do good, to help the weak; in fact, we can then do more or less as the great man and philosopher Christ told us to do. And, dear people" (Aaron became frantic), "then there will be heaven on earth. Then will you feel the sweet ecstasy of purity and bind yourself to the only true God, and look forward to the end of your days. This state I call, for the sake of simplicity, 'Positive heat.' No man, no woman in the world can go further than that. God has put a barrier in the way: Death. The good man, the one who earnestly tries to be good, will look forward to that barrier with no dismay. He ought not to speculate as to what he may find beyond. It is not meant for him that he should know. God knows, and He only."

Here Aaron made a decisive stop.

"I thank you for listening to me, good people. Now, take those thermometers home with you. Don't let them lie about all over the place here, or I shall have to pick them up and give them back to you on some other occasion. I shall be

here every day from 2 p.m. till 5 p.m., provided the weather is not too bad. I hope to see you again. God bless you!"

Thereupon Aaron descended the steps and the crowd slowly dispersed, singly or in groups. Many thermometers were left behind, and the policeman looked upon Aaron with much significant energy. Thereupon the five little boys collected them all in a basket, and a little later marched off to St. John's Mews with the canvas on their heads. Aaron followed at a little distance, with Betty at his side carrying the steps. The lethargic American gentleman watched their departure, and stood thinking for a long time.

* * * * *

Weeks passed. The weather was often stormy and cold, and prohibited Aaron from speaking in the Park. He began to envy the Church, which he had always disliked because it offered the public a "cut-and-dried" God, incompatible with his own conception of deity. But he thought it was well off in having shelter in any weather and being able to draw a congregation in spite of storm and rain. On such days, however, he was not idle. Tired of saying the same things over and over again every day, he set about writing a new sermon, and, in addition, schemed out a series of them, each one dealing with one specific degree of his thermometer.

The loss of the greater part of his fortune had cut deeply into his schemes. He soon realised that propagation even of the most unearthly aims involves money. Mr. Graham, his solicitor, on hearing of his plans, had pointed this out to him with a good deal of clandestine amusement. As a learned man of law he made it quite clear to Aaron that it was his duty to point out to him the dangers that lay in his path.

"My firm," the solicitor said, "has been looking after the interests of your family for seventy-five years (I've looked it up specially). I cannot trace in all the records a greater misfortune than yours. I should therefore not advise you to tie your hands to such an indefinite undertaking. It might well be a pastime for a wealthy man, but will certainly not lead you to prosperity, but to utter ruin. All your fortune now consists of seven thousand and odd pounds. I should

re-invest it carefully and sell your schooner and your lease of that island, even at a loss if necessary. In your unfortunate matrimonial affairs I can give you no advice. I regret them, but I do not know the exact position."

Aaron looked put out, but he thanked the solicitor for his advice.

"Thank you, thank you," he said. "But I cannot see why I should not go ahead with my own ideas. I shall never starve as long as I live, since you have bought me that annuity of twenty-five shillings a week for life. As regards my wife, I consider that she has had her share. I will not give her another penny. Damn it all, she can sell her things, her fur coat that cost a thousand pounds, her rings, necklaces, can't she? I'll be hanged if there's another penny going to her from me. I need hardly tell you why. You can guess. She can have me up for desertion, but the question is, can she find me? And if she does, you, at any rate, need not trouble about that, Mr. Graham. That's settled."

Mr. Graham nodded sorrowfully.

"Now there is a little under £6,000 left," continued Aaron, "deducting that annuity. It's a nuisance. That cable of Phillips's is quite in order. I'm going to send him £3,000 for his purchases in 'Frisco."

Mr. Graham looked more sorrowful. Aaron shook his head, and said:

"Ah, Mr. Graham, you don't understand what that little island means to me. When I'm old and faded I'm going to spend the rest of my days there. Besides, I do a little business from there. I've got several thousand pounds' worth of copra in store, and the three thousand that goes over for clothing and tools is already covered by assets. And then—my thermometer business. I know you laugh at it, but we've all got in our heads some wheel or other that seems to go the wrong way round. Well, life wouldn't be life if it were not so." Aaron paused, then he added while preparing to go, "By the way, I've got an important letter to Bishop Stanton, D.D. Could you find out his address for me? His name isn't in the telephone book."

"I'll look it up. Wait a minute."

After a while Mr. Graham returned and told Aaron that the Bishop was dead and buried.

"Thank you," replied Aaron. "I had two letters to deliver from a Mr. Lewis on my island, but both the people are dead. What am I to do?"

"I suggest burning them," replied Mr. Graham.

Aaron walked home sorrowfully, thinking of money matters.

The thermometers had absorbed a great deal of money and were, so to speak, "eating their heads off" all the time. Following his impulse, which was spontaneous, Aaron had ordered half a million of them to begin with, at a cost of £750. The printers proposed to store this quantity on his behalf and deliver according to his needs. Aaron distributed them at the rate of 20,000 a week, which meant that each of the five little boys had to make four thousand moves per seven days to earn five shillings. However, from the start Aaron had made it clear to them that their work was for a higher aim than just to earn their bread and butter.

The five little boys were also a cause for worry. Sometimes, when the gentleman's groom lodged a complaint about the weird noises they made on a rainy day, or the nuisances they managed to commit, Aaron would be down among them like a flash, looking like an infuriated gorilla, except for his bright intelligence; and in word, sometimes in deed, he would lash the five young monkeys and call them unregenerates. Johnnie, their leader, then generally burst into tears, saying that there was nothing to do but sit and wait for thermometer weather. At that point, Betty had an inspiration.

On a certain rainy morning, when a thick fog inauspiciously brooded over London town, and St. John's Mews was as dark as an empty oven, she came from the kitchen dressed in a flannel petticoat, ribbons and coloured stockings, her hair rolled up among little newspaper spills. She turned a lot of little sausages, covered with boiling fat-bubbles, out of a frying-pan on to a hot dish, and said:

"It's ready, Mr. West. They can come up."

"Call them," grunted Aaron, who was in the act of writing a sermon.

Before the boiling fat-bubbles had disappeared from the roasted sausages, the five little boys came up in a string, sat down, and very soon the little sausages, fat-bubbles and all, had gone for ever. Then they had coffee, were very silent, and Betty gave them each a piece of bread. Then they went down again to the gentleman's coach-house and waited for the weather to clear up.

"No chance," said Johnnie, and asked if any of them unregenerates could turn a penny into twopence. That they set out to practise in silence, knowing that it was their master's breakfast-time.

A little later, Betty came downstairs with a proud flush on her face, and said:

"Come up, you; I've told Mr. West what to do with you."

And up went the five little boys, their thick boots hammering on the steep wooden staircase.

Aaron, seated in a chair, put them in a row in front of him, Betty meanwhile standing behind him and looking very serious. He called each boy by his full name, and said:

"I'm going to make a change. You young fellows haven't got much work in this sort of weather. Now, each of you can take a bundle of thermometers—give them fifty each," he said to Betty—"and go about the streets and sell them at a penny apiece."

"I can get more," said Johnnie.

Aaron looked terrible.

"One penny apiece, I say, you unregenerate, and if you dare to get more, then—we'll see. Now, out of every twelve pennies you get one penny commission, which I will pay to you with your wages every week. Now then, you take Mayfair, you Paddington, you the West End, you Shepherd's Bush, and you, Johnnie, take Buckingham Palace and the neighbourhood."

Johnnie got red in the face.

"And if I see the King, sir?"

"You are to give him one, not to sell it. Hear me? Not sell it. *If* you see the King!"

"Right, sir."

"And," continued Aaron sternly, "if the weather clears up, back you come—back at once. Hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right! March off, all of you. Betty, see them off."

And ten excited feet thundered down the wooden staircase. There came much shrieking and yelling from the yard, and then the five little boys ran off, calling out "Thermomeeters! The latest news for Londoners!"

During the morning Aaron began to study lists of purchases made on his behalf by Phillips in 'Frisco, which had reached him by mail. Then he sat quietly for an hour, thinking of nothing but his island and Somna; and hidden among the satisfactions which his ever-growing work gave him, was a deep-down gnawing pain in his soul. It made him feel that he could not rest anywhere in the world, and that his share of worldly happiness was exceedingly small.

March came in with its winds and fogs. Aaron had found unknown powers in his soul, and by means of hard work and restless thinking was now undoubtedly the most able preacher in the Park. The canvas was still the background of all his sermons and had the air of a seasoned exponent of London weather. With little, smiling Aaron standing before it, it had been photographed by press agents, and had actually appeared in several newspapers.

Aaron, however, was not happy. His work was like seaweed, and the longer he wrestled with it, the more he became entangled in it; it became heavier and heavier and dragged him to the ground. The restless expenditure of vital energy slowly drew flesh and blood from his body. He became thinner and paler than he had ever been in his life. The London climate began to triumph over his health; his voice lost a good deal of its original force; he was haunted by continual attacks of cold to which he never paid any heed, for he put divine work before personal well-being.

As a chef cooks many kinds of food and at the same time has a favourite dish for himself, so Aaron cooked many sermons and had a favourite sermon. Its purport was bodily and spiritual purity. He proved himself a perfect master in dishing up that subject and his sentences were

flavoured with direct inspiration. He alone knew why.

The longer he stayed away from Somna, the longer he disciplined his passions into austerity, the more he longed for the island and its langour, and craved for the heat of unadulterated sunshine. Sun was to him what milk is to an infant. Without it his existence seemed cold, unnatural.

Now, whatever measure of success he was able to achieve by his labours, there seemed little or no satisfaction in it. The more he preached, the more people would listen to him, but that seemed all. The traffic tore along the streets just as before; people went to the theatres, music-halls, concerts, just as before; men waylaid women, and women men, just as before; the world went round and round, just as before; and God was, far away in his heaven—just as before.

Where was the change that he was commissioned by the Almighty to bring about? His thermometers were lying by the dozen in the gutters of the main thoroughfares, rotting like castaway cabbage leaves. Never was he more disheartened than when he saw one of the things lying in the mud, face upward, and read, with positive pain in his eyes, "Cess-pool of Hell," and "God is supreme," and saw the degrees of good and bad trampled by thoughtless passers-by into the thin mud that coats all London streets on a March day. Then he blamed his lack of organisation for this sad fact. He had no system to enable him to set up a more efficient distribution of his divine revelation. He also censured his five little boys. But finally, over a cup of coffee and a lonely bun, he reflected that there must surely be some people on the right road besides himself, and that the thermometer ought only to be given to those who were on the road to hell. Besides, there was no doubt that his five little boys were more gifted with financial instincts than with faculties of psychological observation. So there was some reason for Aaron to console himself. He concluded by thinking that errors and blunders must be excused, being but natural, and therefore healthy, events in so large a venture, and that if considered from the right angle they would ultimately lead to progress.

"Yes, *ultimately*," Aaron encouraged himself. "But what does that mean?"

The future rose darkly before him. Day by day he felt more alone in the world. There was no one like him; no one but God took any interest in him. Sadness began to link itself to his solitude. On a dark morning he sat in his room in St. John's Mews, pushed aside his sermon and began to shed a few tears over his work, whilst passionately longing for Somna, that he might pour into her soul all the anguish of his heart and obtain some of the strength that radiated from her so generously. But Somna was far off. In these doleful circumstances Aaron went down on his knees and commanded God to give him strength and power to go on with his mission, and to protect Somna and the work he had begun with her on the island. For an instant he was filled with strength, yet while still thankful for it in his heart, misery slowly crept in again by a back door and he began to think that he had passed his limit, and was already on the downward path.

At that moment the lethargic American gentleman arrived on the scene, a real *deus ex machina*. Johnnie brought him along and showed him up the wooden staircase to Mr. West's door, which was smothered with thermometers.

Aaron called, "Come in!" and in he went, pulling his cap from his bald head, and gazing quietly into Aaron's eyes.

"Very pleased to see you. I think we know each other a little," said Aaron. "Sit down." And he pulled up a chair for the visitor with all the dignity of a learned ecclesiastic. The American gentleman sat down, very upright, folding up his long legs, and at once began a speech, snarling in circular-saw fashion. Aaron eyed him with a student's interest, and took a sudden liking to him. The man's square jaw, his voice, his round, fanatical eyes, where stubborn tears glittered and seemed to have no access to any drainage (his large nose was perfectly dry), the clay-soil coloured whiskers, the thin, tall figure, and the tall, bold temples which seemed to show intellect, engaged Aaron's attention.

"Uhland Wright is my name," began the gentleman, "American, Irish parentage, born on the other side. Speaker in Hyde Park, as you know" (Aaron nodded genially) "for the last eighteen months. Live in Bermondsey, small dig-

gings; one room; feed at Lockharts'; am poor. Get one pound a week sent over to me from the other side every week, by the Society" (Aaron kept nodding his head), "therefore independent. Now: object of coming to see you . . ." By an unseen process his neck grew longer. "We are rival preachers and you got the pull over me. I will be right down frank. I preach on Christian Science. You preach on a similar thing. Our theories are similar. Now, I have listened to you very often during the last few weeks, and have come to the conclusion that, speaking on principles only, your principles beat mine. I try to show what faith can do to human bodies; you show what it can do to human souls. Yours is the better lot. That's what I want to say. Now when a man of intellect is convinced that all he says is inferior to what another man says, it's time for him to give up saying it at all. And I'm going to give it up, see, Captain? Give it up—like this!" (He snapped his long fingers.) "In fact, I've written to my people that I've lost faith in their propaganda. And why? Because I've got to know a better lot. What lot? Your lot—see? That's why I give it up."

He snapped his fingers once more.

"Now, when I stood listening to you, and being convinced by you that there's but one great God, and that we are but sinners the lot of us, I thought: 'That must be a high theory to get hold of a man like me.' And I also thought that it was a pity a man of your ideas should work all on his own without help. And that's why I've come to see you, Captain. I met one of your boys—a charming little fellow, by the way—who gave me a thermometer, the twentieth I've had given to me. The boy brought me right along to you. Here I am. And I say it's a pity that your good money should be thus wasted on unnecessary distribution of these thermometers, which, to be sure, it costs money to have printed. You ought to have an organisation to prevent this from happening. You should open up a central office and organise branch offices all over England. You ought to push your goods a good deal more and get men to help you to push them, and thus provide a revenue sufficient to pay your expenses. But my heart aches to see a great cosmic idea like yours endangered

by insufficient skilfulness. I've finished my work. You've beaten me. Im here, Captain, to offer you my services. I possess organising powers and speaking powers. I have given up a living and have cast all my own ideas to the wind, on the off chance of being able to help you. I feel *absolutely* confident on that point. There now! In common words, give me a job. A pound a week, as I had before . . . and trust me."

Aaron walked about the room in excitement and knocked his head against the gas lamp, which caused the American to spring up and say:

"I hope you haven't hurt yourself?"

"No, no, man!" replied Aaron. "It's all right. But man, it is not the boy who guided you to me, it is God Himself. Whenever I come to the end of all things, He helps me. He always shows me His hand. I have been wishing and praying for help all the time and now it has come. I'll explain. I have a girl here—Betty is her name—who knows my work. She has ideas, but they are not sufficient either in quantity or force to be of practical benefit to me. But you——" He looked at him with subdued exuberance. "I know *you* have ideas, and let me tell you that although I have, as you say, beaten you, I have sometimes admired your methods on the quiet. Your teaching was sound, practical, suited to the age. But, as you say, only the soul matters now—only the soul."

"I am indeed thankful for your appreciative observations."

"Don't say that," replied Aaron, "but let us talk about my schemes. I cannot say how thankfully I accept your generosity. I have many affairs to look after in this world. I own an island with two hundred souls on it."

"I know," replied the American. "You said so in the Park."

"Well, I must go there as soon as possible. Look at this." He pointed to a bundle of correspondence. "All letters of urgency. My men are at 'Frisco waiting for me. They are eating up precious money all the time." He stood still, holding out his hand to the American. "Let us become friends, let us become real friends."

"But," snarled the other man slowly, "do you trust me, Captain? You don't know me yet."

"Trust you?" said Aaron with incredulity. "Do I trust the man whom God sends to me? Do not ask me that again."

Thereupon they shook hands and began a long talk about affairs. It soon came about that the American *deus ex machina* found a second home. Day after day he was in and out of St. John's Mews, talking to Aaron, to Betty, to the five little boys. And a week later, it was he who stood in the Park before the canvas, preaching; not so well, so originally as Aaron, but fervently, nevertheless. And the Captain was satisfied that it should be so. At last he could find time to devote himself to Phillips's accumulated correspondence and his own fortune.

Then the climate of London struck Aaron down for a whole week. He had braved the winds in the Park once too often, and came to the conclusion that doctors who said the London climate was healthy were liars, and that Uhland Wright had the constitution of a Hereford bull. Mr. Wright began to warm up to his new work, and there was no doubt that he was at it like the devil. Aaron said to him every day: "Man, you're a perfect God-send to me."

"I'm right-down glad," replied Uhland. "Now, you're to keep in bed, Captain West, until that catarrh has gone."

"Ugh!" said Aaron. "I hate bed. If it wasn't for the dizziness when one gets out with a temperature! Ah! the cold seems to freeze my marrow in this dreadful country. I feel wet, damp, frozen all day. And whilst you've been away, man, I've been thinking about my departure. I've got to go. I had another cable to-day."

"Aye?" snarled Uhland, deeply interested.

"Yes," continued Aaron. "If I don't move to my island, two hundred people will perish."

"Aye. What will happen to your business over here?"

"That's what I've been thinking about. Betty thinks you're a perfect orator, and says you talk in sentences which I used to apply. Force, force, my dear man, that's the thing that grips the public. Now, I couldn't go away and leave things as they are. If I did, I should have to begin all over again

when I came back. So I thought of asking you to remain at the head of things until my return. Betty likes you, and I know you're quite fond of the child. Therefore, she might remain as your secretary. Of course, I realise that I must provide maintenance for the business, and I have made some calculations in my head."

"Aye," snarled Uhland, "there is time for that, Captain. I hate money."

"You can't live without it," said Aaron, with a little bitterness.

"Aye—you're right."

"I presume that you agree to remain at the helm during my absence?" inquired Aaron.

The American nodded acquiescence.

"Ah! I feel much relieved," continued Aaron, sitting up in bed. "I will leave things in perfect order. But before I go, I will preach one grand final sermon at the Albert Hall, to launch the new enterprise. I will make it a great national demonstration, and will follow your advice and open up permanent offices in a central position, whence you can organise business. And when I come back, I hope branch offices will be at work all over the United Kingdom. It is a grand thing to look forward to. Mr. Wright, you're a perfect God-send."

Uhland looked serene and said: "Aye, I'll be a friend to you. You leave me a free hand, and that shows great confidence."

Thereupon he threw a great lump of coal on to the fire, and with a long stride went into the kitchen where Betty was at work. He passed his long fingers softly over her brown hair and said, with an uncertain look:

"You're a dear child, an industrious girl. Straight as a ruler. Give me a cup of tea."

Blushing, Betty did so.

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According to the calendar Spring had arrived; yet apart from the increase of daylight, there was not a sign either of Spring, the buds of the poet, or the birds of song that stir the heart of the dreamer. There was, however, plenty of

black frost, mud and fog. On went humanity with iron force, trusting that Spring would come some day or other, whatever happened in the meantime.

One day a weird shop was opened near Covent Garden in a side street off the Strand. It was small, and looked mysterious. The opening ceremony was performed by a charwoman who unlocked the side door from the inside, and the performance was eagerly watched from the other side of the road where there were a saddler's and a confectioner's shop. There stood Uhland, Betty and Aaron, and, in addition, but apart from their group, there was a solitary gentleman with a stomach like a beer barrel, overhung with a golden chain from which dangled a Masonic pendant. He was probably the landlord. The shop came into existence like a young butterfly that bursts from its pupa into the sunshine. There was a mysterious force behind that shop opening, and Londoners quickly gathered from somewhere and nowhere to look on; for in London the slightest occurrence is of import to some one. The shutters were removed by little boys and thermometers were seen piled in the windows and stuck on to the glass crossways. Very soon the promoters of this strange business officially entered the dawn of their new era with smiling faces.

Aaron left soon after the ceremony, and Uhland and Betty remained in the shop alone.

Later in the afternoon Uhland went to the Park, where he was met by the five little boys from St. John's Mews. He began to preach as usual to several hundred people. Aaron was among them, and he listened attentively to the American gentleman, thinking once more what a God-send he was, and looking with confidence to the future development of his enterprise.

"That man," he told himself, "will build up your business while you are away, and when you come back you will step into it as the head of a vast organisation for the benefit of humanity. God lives in him and he possesses power."

And Uhland soon began to show that Aaron was right. He pushed little advertisements into many respectable country papers, asking for "men of zeal and zest to work up a new

enterprise in the name of God and for God's kingdom in the world." Offers poured into the mystery shop, and Uhland pointed to the pile of answers, saying to Aaron: "I must really take time over all this, and I daresay you'll be gone by the time I can get busy on it."

"Never mind," replied Aaron, "you have a free hand. Also in money matters. I thought it best to make dispositions which will save you all trouble. That's why I must return to this subject, for which I know you possess a most unworldly disgust."

Uhland looked dull, and said:

"I hate money, Mr. West."

"Never mind. We need it in this miserable, civilised age, so I leave two thousand pounds in the bank in your name. You can draw on it at your discretion for current expenditure until the revenue from the provincial offices you are to establish begins to flow in. Money means nothing to me where the great work is concerned. I had much more of it a year ago, but I trusted some one too much, and paid for it. Ah, one can never finish learning in life, unfortunately, unfortunately, Mr. Wright."

"Aye, it's sad indeed," replied lethargic Uhland, "but let us not talk about money now. There will be little need to worry. If we can sell five hundred thousand thermometers at a penny each, we shall have a revenue of, roughly, £20,800. Take off, roughly, for expenses and agents' salaries, £10,000 . . . there—the work of God seems well financed."

Lethargic Uhland smiled piously as if surprised at his worldly expansion in figures. He then switched off to the subject of the Albert Hall, which Aaron had been talking about a great deal lately.

"You know," he said, "I'm really not at all certain that your Albert Hall meeting will be successful, in spite of my advertisements. I'm afraid we shall spend three or four hundred pounds for nothing. Here I am talking money again," he added, as a pious apologia for his further indulgence in money matters.

"Never mind," replied Aaron, apparently deep in thought. "It will make a name for us. And in a world of competition

one must compete. Even for God. Look at the propaganda of the churches, the Salvation Army, the Church Army, all the missions and sects. We cannot stay behind. I had great difficulty in getting the Hall for a Monday afternoon. I'm only sorry they won't allow me to distribute thermometers inside the Hall. However, I can use the canvas."

"That's a blessing," snarled Uhland.

"These people, you know, Wright, only want money, money . . . They will not let their hall otherwise, and they make rules of their own. What can one do?"

"It's a world of materialists," snarled Uhland with force, "but we must overcome it."

"We must try," said Aaron, and his eyebrows came down over his eyes. "On Monday I preach my last sermon," he added slowly. "Then on Wednesday I depart, leaving my work behind on your shoulders, Uhland—let me call you Uhland. On your shoulders rests my work until I can return to help you."

Uhland looked quite softened by this address, and putting both hands on Aaron's broad shoulders, he snarled:

"Aaron, my friend, I will pray and work for you. You are the only friend I've ever found in life."

"Thank you, thank you," replied Aaron, quite touched.

He went off quickly. Uhland looked after him with lethargic indifference, showing no emotion of any kind. Then for an indefinite time he stroked his clay-soil coloured whiskers. Finally, he went to pretty Betty, laid his hands on her soft hair once more, and pointed out to her that she was "as straight a girl as there could be."

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Aaron was announced at the Albert Hall to speak upon "How God Reveals Himself." He had chosen that title after careful consideration, and had written what he considered a first-rate sermon on the subject. It began with the human soul that strives instinctively for eternal things. He described its wanderings in darkness until, seized by a strange power, it was carried away to the light. Then that soul begins to be tortured by the problems of good and evil.

"A soul that wanders in darkness is irresponsible, but a soul that knoweth the light of God therewith knoweth good from evil," was one of his sentences. He then treated the human soul from the point of faith. "Faith is to the soul what breath is to the body," he had written. "The man who denies faith destroys his soul, as the man who stops his breath robs his body of life." Thereupon Aaron argued that "God can only reveal Himself by faith, and the latter leads towards eternity."

At that point he intended to take up his cane and work away at his thermometer. He had resolved to tell the public for the first time how the idea of his thermometer had taken hold of him, and of his revelation on the mountain. In all, he calculated, he would speak for two hours. The steward had told him that no public would stand a show of that description if it lasted longer.

That gentleman took Aaron into the Albert Hall on the morning of the fateful Monday and showed him round. Aaron had never seen the place from the inside before, and looked up into the distant gallery with awe.

"They will never hear me up there," he remarked to the steward.

"Oh, yes, they will," the gentleman replied. "They will, stone ginger, they will! They could hear you crack a nut up there if you stand just here." He pointed out to Aaron a special spot. "From here you speak, you see. Like this . . . 'God is great' . . . (he spoke to an imaginary audience). "Hear it? Just try . . . God is great . . . or what ever you are going to say."

Aaron shouted, "God is great."

The steward laughed. "They can hear it in Piccadilly if you say it like that. Now remember that spot; we call it the acoustic focus. And keep your head well down. Speak to the Royal box over there. That's the best direction."

"God is great!" shouted Aaron again to the Royal box.

In the meantime, attendants had fixed up the giant canvas.

After this dress rehearsal, Aaron went to St. John's Mews in high spirits. There he gave orders that the shop should be closed for the afternoon, for Uhland and Betty were to

help in regulating the crowds. The five little boys were given twenty thousand thermometers, in packets of a thousand each, which were to be freely distributed outside the Hall at the end of the sermon.

A four-wheeler was ordered for two-fifteen sharp, to take Aaron clandestinely to the back door of the great Hall.

"It's worth a hundred and fifty pounds," Aaron said to Uhland. "Just think of the push it will give us."

"Lot of money, Aaron," said Uhland, addressing himself to the low ceiling. "It'll cost us three hundred, all done."

"How's that?"

"The advertising, the bills, extras and etceteras."

"Oh," grunted Aaron. "Never mind. Now I want to be alone until the cab comes."

"What about your dinner, Captain?"

"Never mind, I'll eat afterwards. I must get my mind prepared."

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Betty went away, also Uhland, who wore a sardonic smile that pushed his side whiskers apart a good deal. He went to some unknown destination, and bought some almond rock on the way.

At two o'clock the Albert Hall looked as usual, serene and very large; but the doors were all flung open and a commissioner and several black-coated gentlemen stood at the front entrance, looking as important as undertakers. This was to be a great demonstration on behalf of God's kingdom on earth; no tickets were required. There was to be no pother about seats and numbers. A policeman was there, too, and he smiled at the commissioner like a wise man, twinkling both his eyes as he said: "What ho, Mack! airing the place?" But his face took on an official expression when he was asked a question by an old lady, and he pointed to the open doors.

"Which way do I go?" inquired the lady of a curly-headed, respectable gentleman in a frock coat.

"Any way, lady."

She disappeared. Some other ladies arrived, quite a lot of them, and some children, too. All went the same way: "Anywhere."

At half-past two, the time fixed for beginning, the space outside the hall was singularly empty, and the doors were still open. A rubber-tyred four-wheeler, drawn by a lame horse with filled legs, rolled up to the back door; in it sat Aaron, his eyes shut lest the aspect of crowds should disturb the train of his thoughts.

The steward took him into a small, subterranean room, saying:

"All ready, sir!" and then disappeared like a ghost.

Aaron took a deep breath, left the room boiling with secret energy, went up a wrong staircase into the corridor, and then entered the arena. He saw a few dozen people sitting about there, and a few more in the balcony, all looking around the empty hall, and at times staring at the great canvas in bewilderment. Uhland sat in a solitary corner, his long legs folded up like broken straw, his hands thrust into his pockets, and brooded.

"Why don't you let the people in?" cried Aaron, aghast, and with suppressed voice. "What bad management! One would hardly expect it from the Albert Hall people."

Uhland snarled: "People can let themselves in, can't they? All the doors are open."

"Good God!" replied Aaron, "do you mean to say that these are all?"

Uhland nodded, looking very lethargic.

"Aaron," he snarled, "didn't I tell you I never agreed with your Albert Hall scheme? Look at it! It looks like a few rabbits on a common."

"Yes, but you advertised it. I left it all in your hands," grunted Aaron.

"I did advertise. But, you see, to be right-down frank . . . you're not. General Booth. Nobody knows y . . . There's no d . . . in . . . scheme. We shall have to w . . . that a little longer."

"Look!" said Aaron . . . lies . . . g . . . out again."

"Aaron, my dearest
There are two Press r
there—right at the back,

"Good Lord!" groaned Aaron. "I'll go on the platform."

He walked straight through the public arena, climbed on to the platform and began at once. He spoke loudly, as if he were in the Park, and his voice rolled through the great empty building, echoing loudly. He had forgotten all about the "acoustic focus," and what he said was not his prepared sermon. He thundered out a violent attack on the off-hand-edness with which people treated religion.

"There!" he shouted. "Give them food and drink, give them theatres, ballets, jokes, fame, notoriety, and on they will come to feast in masses on these hollow, empty things. Make them pay, take their money; they will come to see or hear. But lo! give them the pure value of the highest things that matter to a human soul—give it them, I say, free of charge, and they will turn up their noses and go past you. Oh! world of fatal ignorance! Dear people, you are but a few here to listen to me. Console yourselves. There are but few who will find the true God. Forgive my hard words, they are not meant for you, but for those who are not here."

Some one in the gallery here broke into a frantic peal of laughter, and rushed from the hall, whipping a handkerchief through the air. Aaron heard the laugh, and sent after the merry individual a stern sentence that was very much like one of his "road to hell" warnings. An elderly lady, who had been piously seated in the arena in serene solitude, rose up and toddled slowly towards a side exit. She was feeling torture and pain, and her sensations were plainly written on her features.

Uhland had been hiding himself, but now he suddenly resolved upon a drastic step. He went by a back way to the platform, walked straight up to Aaron, held up a long, thin finger at the "audience," and said:

"Excuse me, just a moment."

Then he entreated
every

es to cut
do the
sibility
of the
turned
aces, asking

the people there to be good and to believe in the only true, great God; then he walked off, whilst his heart seemed to sink into his knees.

Uhland then snarled.

"Ladies and gentlemen. An unfortunate mistake has occurred arising through an error in advertisement. I must apologise. I cannot say, 'Ask for your money back,' but I can say, 'Come another time.'"

One person applauded.

Then lethargic Uhland disappeared with unusual speed.

At 2.45 p.m. all was over. At 3 p.m. the canvas was quickly removed, and a little later Aaron, Uhland and Betty were back at St. John's Mew, sitting round a little table in deep silence, drinking tea, and eating some French pastry which optimistic Betty had specially held in readiness, meaning to spring a surprise after Mr. West's triumph. She could heartily feel with Mr. West, who would gladly have hidden his face, for all his feelings were written upon it only too plainly.

* * * * *

The Albert Hall episode had broken Aaron's backbone. He felt he was playing a losing game. He was on the point of giving up and next day he said to Uhland:

"Look here, I don't think I'm going about my schemes in the right way. I'm leaving here for 'Frisco the day after to-morrow, and I really don't think it is worth my while spending another penny on that venture of mine. I'll stick to my island."

Uhland, who had foreseen that Aaron's latest experiment would undoubtedly deal him a blow and might cause him to change his mind, said boldly:

"Aaron, you coward! I told you what would happen, didn't I? Hasn't it all come true? What do you think of my judgment? And now you want to throw it all up? Now, just when I've begun to go about things in the right way. Coward, I tell you!"

"Yes, but I'm leaving two thousand pounds behind, and feel I'm not doing any good with it," replied Aaron.

Uhland became bolder still.

"It isn't two thousand, only about fifteen hundred," he said. (His eyes looked full of sorrow and disgust at finding himself talking about money again.) "I'll show you that I am not a coward. Take your money away out of the enterprise. I will go on without it."

The never-flowing tears glittered in his round eyes.

"I trust in God, and He gives me strength. I shall always be thankful to you for bringing me on to this new road. But never shall I turn my head backward—never!"

Aaron was thoroughly taken aback by this manly speech, and said:

"Nay, Uhland, you don't know me. I'm no coward. I've lost faith in myself. You couldn't help that, but I will not lose faith in you. You are a perfect God-send to me. I know you will be more successful than I am. So we'll let things stand as they are."

Uhland looked very lethargic and gripped Aaron warmly by the hands.

"You can go now into the heat and sunshine of which you are in need. Greet the Pacific from me! I looked upon its blues when I was a little boy."

Thus Aaron departed from London. Betty, Uhland and the five little boys bade him good-bye. He was sad; there were tears in his eyes and he thought all his powers had vanished. But yet there was Uhland, his God-send, and he put his trust in him. Rome had not been built in a day, neither would he build up a religious organisation in a month. Uhland, the foreseeing, lethargic American gentleman, had told him that it was the work of a lifetime.

Aaron agreed with him.

THE FOURTH JOURNEY

THE FOURTH JOURNEY

Chapter XXII

The Pacific was calm, void of even a ripple in its profound sleep. There was so much light that human eyes ached; so much heat that the tar in the ribs on the deck planks and masts issued in boiling liquescence. Two schooners schoonered under the equator as best they could. They had done so for three weeks, making little headway, and were in the drift of the currents that stir the lukewarm brine of the ocean with mysterious energy. Oh, what would these two schooners not have given for a breeze, a storm, or a hurricane! Would they not have bravely welcomed the devil himself? If only that stagnation, that weary, terrible calm, that singeing heat would abate! That dreadful silence on board where men were huddled with eyes of lead, heads full of hammer-blows, limbs dangling from their joints like artificial fixtures! If only the darkness would come quickly, and that wretched sun sink down for a night! What an enemy he was! That dreaded golden sunrise, that intense flare of the day, smothering all colour from the eye; that leaden sunset, when man forgets wife and child, God, everything, and longs but for water, and in the want of it, for death. Thank God there was water on both schooners.

Tortured men's eyes were on the look-out for one thing: "the cloud as large as a man's hand." But day superseded day and there was no sign of it. The *Amadea* and the *Baby Lily* were drifting, turning, twisting, there was no escape.

Aaron lay prostrate in the shade of the *Amadea's* foresail that hung lifeless, and gazed into the calm, deep sea, feeling inanimate. Now he had all the sunshine he longed for, but he envied the sharks who coursed about playfully and with

no relaxation of energy in the warm sea. What did these great, investigating monsters expect? Had they perhaps uncanny instinct? The *Baby Lily*, a fat, low schooner, was not more than a couple of hundred yards away. Aaron eyed her with the greatest indifference. The carcase of a heat-stricken ox was thrown overboard and splashed into the warm sea, turning a clumsy, defunct somersault on its last journey. There was a wild rush towards the spot from all sides. Crazy sharks bumped viciously against the planks of the *Baby Lily* to get a mouthful of the corpse. There was a riot; then the dead calm returned. There was no further sound, except a dull voice from the bunks, a destitute swear word from a man who slandered God because his life was not worth twopence.

Towards evening the cloud appeared in the eastern sky: "as large as a man's hand." The instruments foretold nothing. But the schooners knew. A slight tremble of excitement ran all over their structures. The men of ocean started up subconsciously and sampled the air. A word here, a word there—eyes gazed, souls awoke, hearts began to beat. "There she comes! There they come!" And even before the trades arrived, the dead spirits became living ones. There was work, chatter, laughter; the end of a deadly suspense.

In the night, it began to blow gently. Sails began to swell; men and schooners sucked in the draught with vociferous gusto.

Aaron lay on deck in the dark and gazed up into the stars. Phillips sat but a yard away, hunched up against the railings, smoking a pipe, and, for pleasure's sake, spitting around him a cordon that quickly evaporated.

"All them animals will be dead," he said, pointing in the dark towards the *Baby Lily*. "They can't stand the climate."

"What?" said Aaron slowly, with a yawn. "The horses and oxen have gone; that's all."

"You take my word for it, Mr. West, them big animals are waste of money. Except them pigs and chickens. Pigs can live in the islands."

Aaron made no reply. Phillips went on with a long soliloquy concerning animals, ending up with, "After all, not

much harm is done, if the oxen are dead. Cows would be more useful, but what would they eat on an island? And what would be the use of one cow? Who's going to milk her? And oxen! Them fellows are useless; they can't generate a calf, can they? They ought to be bulls. What's the use of a bull without a cow—no more use than that flea-bitten gelding that's pegged out. He couldn't generate neither. And I believe in generating things, Mr. West. I suppose things that don't generate *degenerate*. That, I believe, is the learned expression, Mr. West."

Aaron made no reply. He knew his Phillips and felt that the man needed an outlet for his thoughts. Phillips, on his part, having known Aaron for years, and being able to perceive, not without inward wonder, the progress in the mind of his master with all its mysterious by-appearances, now thought that the time had arrived for him to show Aaron that he also had a mind capable of thought and expression. Aaron drowsed. Whether it was the expression of Phillips's thoughts, his own prostration, the languor of the night, or the sweet consciousness of a near meeting with his beloved, it is difficult to say; but his lips were parted by a smile and his white teeth showed. In his repose he looked attractive and there was an air of distinction in his bearded face. Something noble and heroic was imprinted on his features in spite of his shaggy, muscular manhood.

Phillips kept on talking, not sure whether Aaron was listening to him, but pleased to listen to himself. He felt in the humour to make an excursion in words. Occasionally he made pauses, sucking the smoke through his foul and rattling pipe.

"Now, believe me or not, Mr. West, except them pigs and fowls all will die," he continued in a low, murmuring voice, almost plaintively. "I've told you, that Noah's Ark is a rotten schooner. I wonder Lloyd's did insure her. H'm! hull only for the back journey. What's it mean? It means that if your good copra likes to sink, Mr. West, you're not going to see a farthing back for it. We can't insure a cargo that isn't definable in quantity or value," said Phillips con-

temptuously, probably imitating the words of a clerk in the Insurance Office.

"Them blasted fools," he continued, with the old intonation, "can't insure a cargo without a bill of lading or charter party and all them humbugs. I says that valuable copra is going to sink like a log, Mr. West. I feel it in my rusty joints. Eh, eh! rusty?" Phillips smiled placidly. "Not so rusty after all, not too rusty to knock that damned Garva off his feet for telling me lies. What did he say, Mr. West, eh? He's one of your friends no longer, eh? I've punched him a millstone in the guts. Telling lies. . . . 'Your island is over a volcano'" (Phillips imitated Mr. Garva's voice). "'I shouldn't be at all surprised if it was blown up by now. The French Government knows nothing about it.' All that trash. I've given him 'French Government'—don't you think so, Mr. West? That Garva"—Phillips fortified his evaporating cordon—"keeps his nose up and thinks he's more than we because he can stand on the bridge of a steamer. I've given him steamer—don't you think so, Mr. West? He's had the decency to pay you back your tenner. I should think so. Volcano under your island, Mr. West? He knew it fifteen years ago, and they all knew it. Rotten liars!"

Aaron awoke from his drowse, during which he had heard Phillips's voice humming like a distant lullaby, and catching his last expression, said, as he looked around in the darkness:

"Phillips, bridle your tongue a bit. And light that binnacle lamp. Keep up the regulation. What will the fellows in the *Baby Lily* think of your seamanship?"

Phillips got up slowly.

"All right," he said. "*Baby Lily*"—he said it contemptuously—"thinks she can sail better than we. D'yer think it's because she's carrying all the rum casks? Any one might think it was a devil of a job to carry rum casks. I can hold a candle to them."

"I want you to hold that binnacle lamp and light it," said Aaron. "And let me sleep in peace here afterwards, will you?"

"Lighting a lamp!" growled Phillips. "Hardly a captain's

job. I'll do it just to show them others how I likes Mr. West. I believe 'e's always been a sort of a gentleman."

* * * * *

Close upon a year had passed when Aaron again sighted the island. His heart quivered with delight and the trades did not blow into the sails nearly fast enough for him. He paced up and down, talking to Phillips and the crew. This time he did not come with empty hands. Everything money could buy to make the island a civilised, habitable spot was hidden in the bellies of the two schooners. By his efforts, his care, the transformation of the island would take place; he was the master of it all and his was the command. In his position of dignity and leadership Aaron looked kindly upon every one, and his generous spirit worked upon the men's hearts. They felt firmly bound to the man who was one of them and yet so different in his indefinable solitary detachment. An ancient breed seemed to strive in Aaron, a drop of gentle blood, perhaps, of which no one knew. But it was evidently coming out and spoke clearly, and it never speaks so clearly as in the open air where men toil and sweat to perform work that entails danger and sacrifice.

Aaron just then had little feeling for celestial wonders and looked upon God as something strange and divorced from his soul. There was but one hammer knocking the blood about in his body, and that undoubtedly was the thought of his meeting with Somna. During the last hours that separated him from her he suffered agonies. Endurance pulled the strings of his heart to their uttermost limit, but there was sad sweetness and bliss in the torture.

The *Baby Lily*, at times sailing miles away on her own course, had crept up to the *Amadea* during the night, and on the evening of the following day both schooners sailed smoothly into the reef channel after a hard passage through the breakers.

Two schooners and their living cargoes appeared like a fleet in the tropical silence and solitude. They looked very proud, as if they were saying, "Here we've sailed to this wretched

little island, bringing you what civilisation considers it necessary that you should possess to justify your existence."

The thundering breakers and tossing surf around the reef pacified Aaron, who had neither slept, eaten nor drunk since his eyes had focussed the spot of his dreams. He began to repeat his commands to Phillips.

"Get the Ark further east, opposite to New Chelsea. Effect a landing there, get everything ashore. All the materials to be stored at the storehouse. Get the *Amadca* close to the west reef a couple of hundred yards from the beach."

"I know," replied Phillips. "Get all ashore in the morning. Let the pigs, goats, rabbits, fowls and all run about wild? Not me. I'll have them strung up by their hind legs, every one of them." He scratched his head. "Them boxes with stuffs, cloaks, suits, tools and all them other things want a bit of looking after. You don't want them nipped, do yer?"

"You'll do as I tell you," replied Aaron. "To-morrow evening I want you and McKay and Humphreys to come to St. Felix. We'll talk things over. Sanders, Dale and Jones had better stop at New Chelsea and look after those fellows of the *Lily* a bit. No casks are to be opened yet. And don't forget, it's all common property you're looking after. Remember your responsibility. Now then, the whaler. I'm going ashore."

Aaron's eyes gleamed with joy.

"Ashore, Phillips," he repeated, almost affectionately. "Ashore—home!"

Phillips twinkled both eyes and smiled.

"I know, sir. It means a lot, eh?"

Sanders and Dale rowed Aaron to the sandy girdle on the beach.

Phillips addressed the remaining crew.

"There's to be no nonsense, no swearing, no cask-opening, no humbugging, and the work's to be done afore any of you set out to find your old women."

"What abaht your own?" asked the mate.

"Mind your own business," replied Phillips sharply, "you unregenerate interloper."

"Them fellows" laughed.

Phillips did what his master ordered him to do. He manœuvred the *Baby Lily* to the windward, and had the anchor cast out close to the shore opposite to New Chelsea Vale. Looking into the vale from the sea, he said to the men:

"Awkward position that New Chelsea, I can see that now. A tidal wave could wash it away. Damn foolish place to build them dolls'-houses." He then began to explain the position of New Chelsea. "Yer can't see it from 'ere," he said. "It's behind that corner. Christ!" he exclaimed. "Look at them clouds! They look odd."

"They are not clouds," retorted Jones. "Fumes."

"What the hell!" continued Phillips. "I thought that damned Garva knew more than we about it. Look—and smell! Can't ye smell, ye dogs? That's sulphur. Blimy, it is a volcanic island. Well, I'll be damned!"

Suddenly there was great excitement. Dale and Humphreys began to carry some casks up on deck.

"Mind them casks!" shouted Phillips, "they'll come last. And let no one be tempted to open up."

He drew out a pistol as long as a forearm and balanced it in his hand.

"That ought to stop ye from troublin' too much about them casks, and remind ye of yer contract with Mr. West. Or else I bet some of yer brains will leak out through a little back door." He returned the weapon to his pocket.

"Get that sow ashore now," he cried; "she don't want to go on carryin' for ever. Let her get among the trees. Keep the whalers busy. We'll get all ashore in a few hours. Come on, McKay, come on, Dale, get a move on, and you, you *Baby Lily* fellows! Where's your master? Come on, you. Get busy."

Fourteen men began to work very slowly whilst Phillips kept on shouting, "Work!"

A great black sow was the first to reach land. With a weird grunt she trotted towards a palm tree, put her snout all over the ground, then lay down in the shade. Later on came chickens, ducks, cocks, rabbits. Each creature had a string around one leg and was fastened up to the nearest tree.

Then followed bales of stuff, boxes of tools, sacks of seed potatoes, instruments, and last of all a donkey, who looked extremely seedy. Death stared from his inanimate eyes, and he was appallingly thin, having been "off his food" for a long time. Finding *terra firma* under his feet once more, he kicked his hind legs into the air twice, flogged himself with his tail, then settled down to rest on the hot silver sand. A dozen burly men were unable to get him on the move, and swear words and curses rained down upon the stubborn sufferer. Finally he was carried away bodily towards the palm trees and put down again. He stood upon his legs for a moment, then broke down on to his knees with an almost human sigh and closed his eyes. He never opened them again. A little later the sharks had him.

Phillips swore.

"I told ye he wouldn't live, I told ye. I know all about them animals. The 'eat kills 'em like rats."

The crew of the *Amadea* had told "them fellows" from the *Baby Lily* all about their former concubines, and now all eyes betrayed a glassy hunger for them. Phillips, however, had resolved in his heart to lead a clean life for once, and he was not at all willing to let the crews run wild. So he produced his murderous pistol upon every possible occasion and played about with the muzzle at all kinds of dangerous angles. This sort of game, combined with a stare such as he could only have learned from Aaron himself, rather impressed obedience on his subordinates, and he kept on referring to the powers entrusted to him by Mr. West, the lord of the island.

The men toiled up the little vale towards New Chelsea and great was their astonishment at finding the place swept clean off the ground.

"I told ye," exclaimed Phillips, trying to hide his horror behind a boisterous behaviour. "The sea's nipped the lot. What's them dark bundles over there? Copra—phu!" He held his nose. "It stinks the place out. Rotting, the lot of it, and the whole place fumigated with them poisonous vapours. Let's get away to St. Felix and wait for Mr. West.

You, Dale, Jones, McKay, and you *Baby Lily* fellows, get back to the Ark and look after the menagerie."

He laughed wildly and seemed to wish to be as rough and as merry as possible to squash some other finer feeling in his soul.

"Now then, off you go, and no fingering about those casks." He produced the gun again. "Everything's got to be done orderly. Don't want to give Mr. West more trouble than he's got already, do ye?"

The men returned to the beach. Phillips, Sanders and Humphreys set out for St. Felix. They said nothing further to one another. Phillips appeared to be in a very tragic frame of mind, and his feelings imposed themselves upon the other two, who were wondering how Mr. West would take the news of the destruction of New Chelsea.

* * * * *

During Aaron's absence from the island, Ben Philpot had gone mad. His violent passions had run wild and got the upper hand of him. In addition he had been stricken by the sun. He sat on the steps of his master's bungalow, which was now almost hidden among a superabundant growth of tropical vegetation, and looked blankly into the oncoming night. He wore the last fibres of a pyjama suit; he had a curly brown beard, and a thick growth of unkempt hair enveloped his head. Dearly had nature repaid him for his secret longings and the exercise of his natural rights as sole possessor of the island during a whole year. There had been no one to check the wild beast from establishing itself in his soul.

Poor Ben sat on the steps and gazed towards the pale sky with no feeling that there was commiseration in heaven for a poor wretch such as he. He seemed to be waiting for some one. His instincts still breathed and in his tormented mind there was a spark of hope for something he had to wait for, something that would turn up; some obdurate memory forced him to sit and wait every night on the steps of the bungalow.

Somehow Ben knew that it was not the saintly face of Tata-hita that he was waiting for. Long ago he had driven

her from her little hut opposite by his proximity. It was for some one else he was waiting, or for some wonder to turn up. A vague expectation was alive in his brain. And if the wonder did come, he might not recognise it. His reason was void, his eyes were seeing things that were not. Ben remembered nothing from the moment the sun had bitten him in the back of the neck. Since then he could call up but few things in his mind, and on these he feasted, talking loudly of them, singing about them, and beseeching Dorothy and unknown people to stay with him, or entreating a native crowd to remain on the island. He giggled and swore at phantoms as he went to tear from the trees the bread-fruit which he needed, or trotted to the distant little stream to drink like a diseased wolf, lest life that had clung to him tenaciously should cease.

The roof of St. Felix had come down in places. There was a wild smell in its vicinity generated by intense vegetable odours and the foulness of decaying timber. The air was polluted by an insalubrious admixture of sulphur vapour. Nature seemed afraid of itself.

Suddenly Ben Philpot ducked his head and listened. He heard footsteps, and with a few soft strides retreated into the bungalow. Then he crouched against the harmonium and heard a man coming nearer, quickly and out of breath.

"Philpot! Philpot!" cried Aaron, "where the devil are you? What's become of Miss Lewis? Where are they? Where are you?"

Wretched Ben did not know who spoke to him. But a strange, wrecked force within him stirred him to obey that voice. With great speed he darted out, like a dog whose master had arrived. The moon lit up his invertebrate personality.

"God in Heaven! Who are you?" exclaimed Aaron, with deadly anxiety. Then he gazed intently, and added, "Philpot—man—you? Are you crazy, then?"

Poor Ben smiled. That voice was the thing he had waited for.

"I am the lord of the manor," he said.

A short time ago when Aaron had arrived at the little hut under the bread-fruit trees with a smile that indicated a mind and senses intoxicated with the sweetest, greatest, happiest expectation, he had stood still, literally crushed, so full of love was his heart.

"I will take her into my arms and never, never let her go again," he had resolved. But when he had entered, all had been empty, desolate. The blood had retreated from his head and he had seen little figures rotating in the air before his eyes. Then he had rushed to his bungalow, the uncanny odour of burning sulphur increasing all the time and filling him with apprehension.

Now, moved by a sudden impulse, Aaron caught Ben by the arm and dragged him into the full light of the moon. Ben smiled a smile which might have meant death to Aaron; but Aaron, almost crazy with anxiety, cared nothing for that—he cared only for Somna.

"Come here, you demented fellow," he said, exerting all his energy in his despair. "What has happened to you?"

He let Ben's arm go quickly and shuddered at seeing him begin to lick a sore upon it with the innocence of a child.

"Where is Somna? Where is Miss Lewis? . . . Where is she?"

"I am the lord of the manor. Please don't go away. I pray you, stay on this island. Brother Aaron will return," said Philpot. "I pray you. . . . Dorothy, don't go away and leave me all alone!"

And he began to sob hysterically.

"Brother Aaron will return. He will. God is great. Oh! ask Tata-hita, ask her—stay for her sake. Wonderful lady, return to me to-night. . . . Come and hear the voice you love. It has come at last. . . . Come and stay with the lord of the manor, I pray you. Dorothy . . . oh, do not leave me!"

Aaron took Philpot by the shoulders and shook him.

"Man—madman—what have you done to yourself? Could you not wait and remain sensible? What have you done during my absence? Could you not be satisfied with Dorothy? Why did she go away from you? What's turned you soft?"

As soon as Ben heard the name of Dorothy, he began to cry out again, entreating her not to go away but to stay with him. Suddenly Aaron was seized with abject terror. Hurling the madman away from him, he began to run towards the mountain. The smell of sulphur became more intense the higher he went, and a new terror linked itself to his already existing fears. He remembered Garva telling him that the island was on a volcano. Thin layers of a strangely coloured vapour surrounded the eastern district of the island. They could not be mist. The lazy trade winds broke up a thick cloud emitted from behind a projecting bit of the mountain hidden from his view, and the moon shaped the fumes into ghastly phantoms. Aaron raced on to Tunga, stricken with the deadly fear that uncertainty alone can create.

Morning dawned as he reached the outskirts of the village which lay before him in orderly peace. The main street was swept clean, the chapel stood on the east side as before. The smell of sulphur was absent; the trades inverted it. When Aaron beheld the peace of morning resting over Tunga, he could scarcely believe it. He took a breather, his heart began to sing, and he almost wept with joy.

Orderliness, cleanliness—the chapel! It was all there, a sure sign that Somna was alive. She lived—he knew it—he saw it. How quickly he recovered, how quickly the torture of the past night was replaced by thankfulness!

Aaron headed straight for Marva-rao's house. The aroma of baked bread-fruit welcomed him. Drawing aside the curtain of fibrous matting, he saw Hezekiah Marva-rao's giant body standing upright in the middle of the hut. He wore a heavy, dark cloak and looked awe-stricken with surprise. Under the surprise was a veiled glance of savage disappointment or rage, which for a moment repelled Aaron. He paid no heed to it, however, but grasped Hezekiah firmly by the hands, saying, "Thank God you are here, dear friend and brother. My soul is full of happiness at seeing you."

By degrees, Hezekiah recovered from his surprise.

"Welcome, thou great brother, welcome. Thanks be to Jahavah for thy return," he said, with unnatural indifference.

"Where is Tata-hita?" asked Aaron anxiously.

A strange, dull, insurgent look came into the giant's eyes, and Hezekiah became the cynic pagan of yore. His fleshy lips had a dark hue, and he said in a low, hoarse voice:

"Tata-hita in Tunga with Mother Sabeth. Brother Benanin turned bad in spirits." Saying this, Hezekiah looked terrified, then he added, "Thou wilt hear much news, white man. Ask thou Tata-hita."

"Where does she live?" inquired Aaron, discomfort creeping into his heart.

"If thou hast come from St. Felix, thou hast passed the house on the road. Return thou, count thou two thousand paces and turn thou by the great rock; thou wilt then see Tata-hita's house."

Aaron prepared to go. "Will you come and show me the way?" he asked.

Hezekiah shook his head, and replied, "No, white man."

"But we could speak together on the road——"

"Thou go alone. We talk later. Jahavah go with thee."

Aaron left Hezekiah hurriedly. Whilst he paced quickly in the direction indicated by the giant he could not forget his words, "Thou wilt hear much news."

"There will be much bad news," he reflected, "but nothing matters if only Somna is alive and well." And as soon as he perceived the little hut he murmured, "Thank God—at last!"

* * * * *

Early that morning Somna knelt before Mother Sabeth, who lay on her back and swallowed some liquid from a shell which her daughter held to her lips. The lips of the suffering woman were tightly drawn together, her breathing was hard, at times desperate. Death was waiting for her, but had not collected her yet. Presently she moved her head inertly to signify that she could drink no more. Somna rose up. Her dark velvet eyes wandered around the miserable dwelling with despair. She left the hut for a moment to breathe the early morning air whilst she began to arrange her coal-black glossy hair which had become dishevelled during a restless night. Her eyes, expressing the nervousness of a

hunted deer, looked almost unwillingly in the direction of Tunga, as if she expected some great danger, something terrible to befall her. There was a spell of intranquillity over her body and soul. She seemed full of secret anxiety.

But at the same time there was force in her features which bore the stamp of innate goodness and absolute determination. Her little oval face was somewhat lengthened, showing that she carried a cross of sorrows and hardships. Yet from her attitude it was apparent that she wished to carry that cross, that she willed to fight against its terrible weight. During Aaron's absence she had walked in an abyss of misery, had spent days and nights in torment, but not a single tear had ever relieved her heart which was now full to bursting of bitter experiences. And not for one moment had she thrown up her arms and doubted that there was a God, still supreme, still almighty, still listening to her humble prayers.

Thus Aaron met her for the third time in his life. His eyes sparkled with moisture when he saw her, and a lump was in his throat as he opened his arms to clasp her hard to his breast. But Somna did not respond. She stood transfixed, her eyes gazing on the ground, her beautiful neck bent forward as if she were weighed down by some heavy guilt. But her breasts heaved like the waters of the ocean in a cyclone. Neither spoke a word. Aaron let his arms drop in the terrible apprehension that the woman of his dreams, Somna, whom he loved, was a stranger. He knew not why she bowed her head, why sorrows had drawn shadows over her soft beauty, why hardness was printed around her lovely lips. He felt sick for the want of her, but Somna was evidently not his. He appeared like a stranger to her, too. All this came to Aaron as a hard disappointment and chilled his moved heart. He could not find a word with which to greet her, yet Somna was waiting for a word from the great white man. Aaron, as if driven away from her, stepped back a few paces.

Suddenly he realised that Somna, whom he loved so dearly, needed help and devotion, and he cried out to her:

"I have come back to you. I remain with you. I will share your sorrows."

"Thou art welcome, and God sends thee. Wilt thou come with me into the shade of the trees? I must speak to thee."

She strode off in the direction of a cluster of casuarinas which spread their shadow over a carpet of moss, and Aaron followed her with secret anguish.

She seated herself; Aaron crouched down not far from her. He gazed at her intently and was horribly struck by her expression of guilt. But he also noticed once more how intensely spiritual she was; and this spirituality sent a thrill of celestial happiness through him.

"Somna," he said in a trembling voice, "I have not come back with empty hands. I have brought with me two ships full of comforts for our little island."

"Thou canst not bring comfort to me, dearest; it is too late."

"Too late?" he interrupted hastily. "But you are here. I have been to Tunga and have seen your work. It is wonderful."

Her deep eyes looked at him with piercing sadness.

"Thou art satisfied now, I see," she continued in her sad, singing voice. "Thou hast made haste to come and see Somna. Thou dost not know—thou dost not know. I saw it in thine eyes."

"Tell me what it is," he begged eagerly. "All I know is that you are well, and that poor Ben has gone mad." He noticed a slight shudder go through her. "I know," Aaron continued feverishly, "that St. Felix has fallen in and that you and Mother Sabeth are living here, that Tunga bears witness to your glorious work for God, and that my men are now disembarking with all the stores at New Chelsea. I know that there is news for me. Marva-rao told me so before he sent me to you."

"Marva-rao?" she said, with an uncertain look which filled Aaron with apprehension.

"Yes, I saw him first thing this morning, and he said there was much news."

Somna meditated for a while, gazing before her. Aaron thought she had never looked so saintly and so heroic. It stirred his heart wildly to be so close to her.

She shook her head sadly. Then she made a movement, as if to get rid of a load, and said:

"Dearest, thou knowest nothing. Thou hast come here hastily to turn away hastily, for when I have spoken thou must go away from me and take with thee forgiveness for Somna."

"Speak—— Speak; tell me!" said Aaron fervently.

She began slowly in a tone of confession.

"When thou hadst gone from me I prayed for thy welfare and return. God has listened to my humble voice. Thou hast come back well. Somna worked with Hezekiah Marvarao and Brother David Fananao. But eight months after thy departure there was a trembling of the earth, a storm, and the seas went high and terrible. The waves rolled across the reef and inland. They could not touch Tunga, for it is on the mountain side, but they broke into New Chelsea and carried away all thy work. Brother David fled with the saved souls of New Chelsea and they hurried across to Tunga. Thy servant, Brother Benanin, said 'No.' He commanded in thy spirit that the souls of New Chelsea should remain to save thy property in the storehouse. Somna hurried to New Chelsea with thy servant, Brother Benanin. But the people of New Chelsea refused to listen to my voice and fled over the mountain to Tunga. I threw myself in their way, but they hastened across my body, stricken with terror, for the mountain side to the east had opened and cast out poisonous vapours."

Somna deliberately avoided Aaron's eyes that were filled with surprise and terror.

"Where are the people of New Chelsea now?" he asked. "Have they all come back to Tunga?"

"No. When the earth trembled, Tenania and Bara-toi came out from the woods among the people and said that Jehovah was beaten, that Oro was causing the children of Tunga and New Chelsea to die in his wrath. The children of Tunga believed her tongue and Marva-rao returned to Oro."

"Marva-rao!" said Aaron, with a groan.

"But David Fananao persevered. I went into their midst

to cause peace to be established. I helped David Fananao, but the people of Tunga returned to Oro."

"But now Marva-rao has returned to God?"

"Wait thou, I will tell thee in time. David Fananao and the children of New Chelsea decided that they should build a large native ship and sail away, lest blood should be shed against the will of God. So they departed, offering me and Mother Sabeth to journey with them. They parted from me with tears and sorrow, and I prayed for them. Then I returned to St. Felix to restore my sick body to health. Marva-rao sought me out. 'The people of Tunga are alone,' he said. 'No longer is New Chelsea. The work of God is in ruins. New Chelsea is a sick place covered with smoke from the mountain. Jehovah does not live, but great is Oro.' I returned to Tunga and met in council with Tenania, Bara-toi and Marva-rao. He offered me marriage, to be his only wife and queen. I said no, I would rather die, and I scorned him with harsh words. Then I returned again to Mother Sabeth.

"When I lay down to rest my tired head, I heard some one laugh. I went to see. I saw Brother Benanin, thy servant. God had taken his spirits and he was sore afraid. I prayed with him, but God would not give him back His Holy Spirit. But He sent me strength to overcome his soul that was set out to do evil. Then Marva-rao came back and offered me to return to Jehovah if I came to live in Tunga. I went into council with God and was in utter darkness. But I decided to go to Tunga, as New Chelsea existed no longer, and I asked God again to give me of His Almighty power to hold out for His kingdom. And mother was much afraid of poor demented Brother Benanin. Marva-rao sent men from Tunga to carry Mother Sabeth. When we came, Marva-rao offered me marriage again. But I stood firm. I held him to his promise to stand by Jehovah and God sent me great strength to overcome evil. Tenania and Bara-toi returned to their dwelling in the wood. Tunga is all that is left—one hundred souls. I have done my best, dearest, but the ways of God are not our ways, and no one is good but one, that is God. Scold thou Somna, weak, foolish woman, who has ruined thy work during thine absence. Do thou tell me that thy

eyes are displeased to see me, that thou hast put thy trust into a false heart. Scold me. Souls have returned to darkness. Thy savings have gone! Many returned to Oro!"

Her lips quivered like those of a child. Suddenly she flung herself round with elemental violence, burying her face in her hands; and from her inmost heart came a torrent of bitter tears.

"Say thou that thou art displeased. Scold thou Somna!" she sobbed. "Scold thou Somna!"

Aaron was struck with terror. He understood much, yet very little. But he sprang to his feet, lifted her up bodily, pressed her tightly to his body for a long while, and his lips covered her cold, quivering mouth. She hung in his wiry arms like a strange, beautiful dead flower, and his tears of joy mingled with hers of wretchedness.

Hours seemed to pass in that moment so intense and terrible.

It was as if two strange worlds had collided and commenced to consume one another. Suddenly a wave of heat animated Somna. She opened her arms and shrank back. Aaron held her by her wrists.

"Somna, dearest child," he said. "New Chelsea has gone, all has gone. I know it, but I have you, you! Every drop of my blood belongs to you, to you only. I have returned for you, you only. What does it matter if the world is wrecked as long as I have you—you!"

She freed herself, looking at him with tormented eyes.

"Thou sayest thou wantest me?" she asked with incredulity. "Thou hast returned for me only? Thou dost not care if the world be wrecked? Dearest . . . art thou certain?"

"As true as there is a God, Somna, I love you dearly. I will give up my life to you and forget everything else in the world."

A curious flash came from Somna's eyes.

"Thou art sinful," she said, with a deep, shaky intonation. "Thou hast cast away God for me. Thou art no longer a brother to me. I know thee now."

She turned away from him, covering her face.

"God help thy humble woman," she said, then paced away, sobbing aloud as she went away from him.

Aaron stood watching her departure, almost demented. The nearer she came to her humble house, the more hasty were her steps, the more cutting her unchained grief. Finally she disappeared from view.

Night seemed to spread over Aaron's senses. He darted towards the hut and stood still, out of breath, almost out of his mind. In his anger he dared not enter, so he turned and walked away towards the mountain, following as if by instinct the path to St. Felix.

He went along, perplexed in his soul, ashamed in his mind; for in plain words Somna had rejected him. She did not love him.

"Poor Somna," thought Aaron, "you do not know me yet. You think my heart does not ache for New Chelsea and the work of God, and because you are a woman, you cry. Do you know your bitter words have stabbed me to the heart? My work is wrecked, New Chelsea is wiped away by the sea and Tunga is but a beautiful apple full of worms. Do you know what I have staked on this island? Do you know what it means, the storehouse and the copra having been carried off by the sea?"

For a moment he almost resolved to turn back to tell her what he was suffering, but he only stood still for a while, shook his head sadly, folded his arms behind him and then walked on again.

"You suffer, dear child," he thought. "But I will not add my sorrows to yours. I will continue my work, rebuild, reorganise. Alas, little David Fananao and my savings have vanished! There remains but Tunga. Whom can I save there?"

When Aaron arrived at the obelisk he looked over the ocean, the clouds, the sky, the woods shrouded in vapour. He longed for Somna with all his heart, and flung himself down upon the ground.

* * * * *

Marva-rao stood upright in the centre of his hut for hours. There was no sign to betray that his body was alive. His

eyes stared dully out of his tattooed face; his lips were moulded into an expression of cynic indifference.

Brother Aaron had not returned to him.

At last the chief moved. He flung away his cloak, donned his headgear of coloured beads and took up a spear. Then he strode off towards Somna's hut, his body glistening in the sunshine like copper with patches of verdigris. He looked upon the huts of Tunga with disgust.

He went into Somna's presence without ceremony. She received him with calm, determined eyes, and led him away from the hut a little distance.

"Brother Aaron returned," he said, with a veiled glance.

"I know," she replied. "He has gone again."

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"Thou dost know."

Somna looked at him firmly. He did not insist.

"Go thou back," she said, "and have thou the drums beaten for church. Somna will come and tell the people that Brother Aaron has returned."

Marva-rao drew down the corners of his lips.

"Drums will beat for Oro, not for Jahavah," he said, almost inaudibly. "Marva-rao return to Oro. But will remain with Jahavah if thou wilt become his wife before return of Brother Aaron."

Somna looked upon the giant with icy calm. She was but a fragile, beautiful little creature standing by his side. Marva-rao could have broken her to pieces with one hand. But there was no spirit or passion in him; he made his marriage offer calmly and with the greatest indifference. Somna never relaxed her stern gaze.

"Thou wilt never return to Jehovah," she said, "thou art away from Him. Go thou to Tenania and Bara-toi, children of Oro. Thou hast never believed in the only true God, but thou art not too late to turn thy heart to Jehovah even yet. Do not thou ask Somna to marry thee. Somna serves the only true God and is not man's woman."

Marva-rao uttered a hissing sound, and his lips took on a

darker hue. He turned away with slow, pompous dignity, and strode off to Tunga.

When he had gone, Somna trembled from head to foot, and cried out: "Oh, God, do not Thou leave Thy humble servant!"

The great chief hastened through the village towards the woods with the speed of a camel, in order to visit Tenania and her blind husband.

"Hast thou married the bastard?" cried Tenania, who was spread out upon the ground, the lower part of her face hidden behind a bread-fruit which she was devouring, whilst her little eyes gleamed like those of a snake. "I can see in thy face, great coward, thou art false to thine old friends. Let Bara-toi, the swine, show thee how to seek a woman. Thou wear-est thy war dress and spear? Has the white man, son of the false God, returned?"

"Thou sayest it," replied Marva-rao.

Tenania became erect with incredible speed. She broke into a fanciful laugh. "Great coward, hast thou come for my counsel? Cannot the white God inspire thee?"

"Thou speakest foolish," replied Marva-rao. "Do not thou call me a coward. Thou thyself art frightened of the white God who possesses the Brother Benanin. Tata-hita is not frightened by him, she seeks him and speaks to him."

Tenania growled uncanny words at the mention of mad Ben.

"Has the white liar come alone?" she asked Marva-rao.

"Alone to Tunga. But not alone in his ship."

Tenania flung away the bread-fruit and meditated.

Meanwhile Bara-toi had come out of his residence on all fours. It could be seen that he was suffering from elephantiasis. There was not a tooth left in his mouth. He was mute and when they spoke again he seemed to take no notice of their conversation.

"Thou art great at the throwing the cudgel," said Tenania. "Go thou now, great coward, and kill the white liar. Take thou care to find him alone. Then Tenania will show thee how to marry the bastard."

Marva-rao hissed weirdly, and turned back to the village.

There he found some people assembled around the entrance of the chapel, and Tata-hita telling them, with tears in her eyes, that the great white man had returned, and that there would be an end to all their sufferings.

Chapter XXIII

Somna's rebuke had stung Aaron deeply. Upon the first pain of his meeting with her had followed a second pain, more acute. It was the bitter disappointment at having the dream of months destroyed in one moment.

He became almost frightened of his love for Somna, of his desire to be the sole possessor of so mysterious and unknown a soul and mind. His love made him long to come up to her mark, to equal the noble qualities which she displayed, and now he began to be almost pleased that she had refused his love, although it wounded his pride and made him angry.

He went on to consider what he had better do now. He felt an impulse to remain near her and to protect her, as he feared for her safety. But a still stronger impulse impelled him to keep away from her. Poor Somna needed time to get over the shock he had given her. He was sure that in the end she would come to him and that their old friendship would bloom again. Perhaps even something finer, deeper and more intimate would flower from it in the future. He could not expect her to behave like an English girl at home. She was a strange virgin, of strange parents. Her love would naturally be strange as all her life had been. Yet in whatever form it might show itself he would make himself worthy of it. If she was good and great, he would be just as good if not as great.

Aaron rose up heavily and went towards St. Felix.

* * * * *

Near by the obsolete bungalow stood Phillips, Sanders and Humphreys: a silent, tragic trio. Phillips said, pointing towards the mountain:

"Here comes a man—it's the master."

The three seafarers glued their eyes upon him.

"If he hasn't found Miss Lewis," remarked Phillips, "then I do call't the worst luck I've ever known."

"I wonder if he knows about Philpot?" said Sanders. "That'll be another blow for him, won't it?"

"He liked the bloke, didn't 'e?" inquired Humphreys.

"Course 'e did," said Phillips. "You don't know the master. None of ye does."

"It's hard cheese on old Ben," remarked Sanders in a deep chest voice, "to go mad like that, and hard on the master, too."

When Aaron neared the little group of men he did not increase his slow pace, but kept his arms behind his back. To see his misfortunes witnessed by his men intensified his feeling of loss. He hated to see them standing there staring at him in silence. He did not want their pity.

"Evening," the men addressed their master. Then Aaron's silent and uncanny behaviour caused Phillips to inquire hastily:

"How is Miss Lewis and Mrs. Lewis?"

"Alive and well," replied Aaron.

The three men seemed relieved. They waited for an address from their master, but he remained silent, looking upon the ruins of his bungalow with distress.

"We'll soon build another one," said Phillips, watching him closely. "A much nicer one, too, up on the hill where the air isn't poisoned."

"Where is poor Philpot?" inquired Aaron.

The men looked at one another queerly and made little haste to answer.

"Well, you see, Mr. West," Phillips commenced slowly, scratching his head.

Aaron cut him short.

"I know all about him. I saw him before you did. You needn't tell me anything." Water glistened in his eyes. "Where is poor old Ben?" he asked again.

Phillips explained with nervous haste.

"We couldn't believe our eyes, Mr. West, when we came here. We could hardly find the bungalow, and when we did

see it, a man darted out like a blackbird from a tree. We didn't know who he was and went after him. I knocked him on the head with this." He shook the butt of his gun. "Then we bound him and brought him back, and—fancy—it was Philpot! I didn't want to knock him, so help me God; but he was biting like a puma. There—look at Sanders' sleeve! He nearly had his teeth in his arm."

"Is he dead or alive?" asked Aaron, with surprising calm.

"Oh, he's alive all right, and none the worse for it," replied Phillips, looking from face to face. "But we had to rope him up a bit. He got too lively."

There was a long silence, then Aaron said:

"Poor wretch! I did not foresee this; God is my judge, and you three can hear me. I ought to have stayed in his place. I would suffer in his stead now, if I could. That's what comes of civilising. It's madness in itself. What have I gained by it? Nothing. Look at it! God is so displeased that He makes the ground rock. Civilisation!" Aaron laughed bitterly. "We ought—I ought to be ashamed of myself. I go and tell people what God is, and don't know Him myself. Can't you see, men, what has come of it? Man ought to master himself and not let his greed, his violence, his passions, carry him off his feet."

He broke off. The men were staring at him. Then he said, abruptly:

"I suppose there's no copra left in New Chelsea?"

They shook their heads in silence.

Aaron bit his lips and his pointed beard stood out aggressively. The men's eyes were glued on him.

"Where did you put that poor Philpot?" he asked, just as abruptly as he had inquired after the copra.

"On the verandah."

"I'll go and see him."

They all went into the jungle to the bungalow.

"Let him loose," said Aaron. "It turns my heart sick to see him lying there, rolling his eyes. After all, what has he done, poor wretch? He's suffering for me."

He knelt down to untie the Gordian knot of the cord that had been fastened all round the madman.

"He'll bite again," said Phillips.

"Let him bite!" replied Aaron sternly.

Ben began to cry out:

"Brother Aaron will return, oh, holy lady, I can hear his voice. It is freeing the lord of the manor. Dorothy . . . I shall be free again. Oh, let me stay near that voice—let the lord of the manor stay!"

He rose up, holding his beard in his hand pensively, gazing from Aaron to Phillips and the others like a student of character; then suddenly he made a wild dart into the bush. They could hear him laugh and sing out for Dorothy.

"We shall have to send him off with the *Baby Lily* crew," said Aaron, and he seated himself on the steps of his bungalow, covering his face with both hands. Phillips swore like a regular blackguard and retired to a distance with Sanders and Humphreys, saying:

"I'll be so-and-so damned if I don't get them fellows to build Mr. West a bungalow in less than so-and-so time. Ain't it marvellous how he looked at poor old Ben? Ben seemed to become more sensible for a minute."

"The master will look after him, you bet," added Humphreys. "Lord! I believe 'e thinks it's 'is fault that Ben turned soft, eh?"

They waited for over an hour, but Mr. West did not move. Then Phillips went to him and suggested with a good deal of warmth:

"Mr. West, let us all go off to the schooners. We shall have to decide what we must do."

"You go," said Aaron. "Do what you think is wise to-night. I remain here."

"But Ben——"

Aaron looked sternly at his captain, and said:

"Ben is harmless. I'm not afraid."

The three men went slowly away. At a little distance Sanders said:

"It's getting uncanny."

"What is?"

"All is."

"Well, what abaht it? You're funkin', are yer?" inquired

Phillips. "Get back to them others. I stay here. I'm going to hide here and be near Mr. West."

"Who talks about funkin'?" inquired Sanders.

"I do," replied Phillips, "but not you, Sanders. I'll take it back. Shake it."

They shook hands. Then the three men disappeared among the thickly growing myrtle trees.

The moon rose with all its splendour. The Milky Way was brilliant, intense. Myriads of stars glittered, and in the shadows of the night the trades gently stroked the silent island. One star, brighter than the rest, shone for Aaron: Somna. And towards that star he gazed. It was the only light in his future. He slept. He dreamed. A happy smile parted his lips. His white teeth glittered in the moonshine.

Phillips and the two sailors roosted under the myrtle trees not far from the bungalow.

"Stop that coughing, Sanders!" Phillips said in an angry whisper. "Can't yer swallow that smoke without coughing, yer brute? Do yer want to wake Mr. West? He don't cough. Why the hell should you?"

Sanders grunted in his heavy sleep, perhaps automatically at hearing his name.

"That's it," continued Phillips "Drowse away like a happy bloke. Dream of your old woman. There ain't none here."

"Why don't you go to sleep, Master Phillips?" asked Humphreys. "It's past midnight; I'll stay awake. Me eyes is like sandbags, but don't matter. A little rum wouldn't be out of place 'ere."

"Unregenerated boozier!" grunted Phillips scoldingly. "Mr. West don't touch the filthy stuff. Why the hell should you—eh?"

"You'd like some yourself, I'll bet," said Humphreys.

Phillips fingered his gun.

"What's that?" he said, suddenly darting up. "Listen!"

Sanders woke up immediately.

There was a noise, a rush in the distant bushes.

"Mad Ben!" said Sanders, horrified. "I dreamt 'e bit me 'and off."

"Shut up!" commanded Phillips. "Listen!"

There was not a sound. Then suddenly there was a howl: a terrified cry:

"Dorothy!"

"Bloody ghosts!" said Humphreys, turning icy cold.

"Ghosts!" retorted Phillips. "I'll give you ghosts!" He gave him a kick. "Poor old Ben, shrieking for Dorothy," he said.

Nothing further happened.

The three fellows settled down once more. The night was silent, the dawn came up in the sky, the moon paled, and day broke. The three men went to pick up Mr. West.

Aaron stretched himself in the morning sun, and said:

"Halloa! Where do you come from?"

"From nowhere," replied Phillips. "Ye see, Mr. West, we couldn't very well leave you here alone. You've not told us anything about the people of the island. There might be some hostile ones."

"But here I am all right," said Aaron. "What do you want to worry about? There are no hostile people on my island. And if there were, they wouldn't come near mad Ben."

"We heard a strange noise during the night," said Sanders.

"Well, with poor Ben at large, I should think so."

"Yes, hooting for Dorothy."

"We shall have to take care of Ben somehow," said Aaron. "What terrible air there is here! I think I've had my last sleep in St. Felix. I'm going to burn it all down. Come on, men."

* * * * *

St. Felix and the unsavoury jungle adjoining it were set on fire by their owner. Aaron saved nothing but the harmonium, now covered with insalubrious parasites and mildew. He had a short "go" on it, and found that it still squeaked. In a very short time huge flames were licking the tar-soaked rafters and devouring the bungalow hungrily. The four men stood watching the wild conflagration from a distance. The flames which at night would have lit up the whole district were almost invisible in the glare of the tropical sun. But the smoke was prodigious and the uproar infernal. Aaron looked grave

and was silent, whilst Phillips began to talk again of a new St. Felix that was not yet built, but would be built so-and-so quickly on the mountain side near Tunga. He thought Mr. West cared a lot for a bungalow. Perhaps he was right.

At last, when the roaring of the flames had died down, and nothing remained but the intense glow of the smouldering ashes and a fearful smell, Aaron said to Phillips:

"Now I think we'd better build a new bungalow. I should like it to be up near the lake and the casuarinas. There's no smell there. The air is healthy, and the trades can get at it. What do you think?"

"I was going to say, that is the very spot."

"How are we going to get the necessary things up there?"

"The wagon, Mr. West."

"But the horse is dead."

"We are alive, aren't we? What about six men against a flea-bitten gelding? Don't you think we might manage the wagonette and a few loads, one at a time? We've got time."

"Plenty of time," replied Aaron, in a colourless voice. "I've seen enough fire. Let us go to New Chelsea."

"Well, let us go," said Phillips. "We'll brave New Chelsea."

"There's no copra left at all?" inquired Aaron in a by-the-way manner.

"None that doesn't stink the place out. The sea's nipped the lot; dolls'-houses, chapel, storehouse, everything, the lot of it."

"Do you remember what we spent on purchases in 'Frisco?" Aaron asked.

"Fifteen thousand six hundred dollars, Mr. West. A lot, isn't it?"

"Do you remember, Phillips, at how much we estimated the copra?"

"Four thousand pounds, you said, sir."

"H'm! All gone!"

Aaron was silent, and walked along quietly; then suddenly he shook himself as if shuddering a little, and said:

"It's horrible, Phillips. All the things are here now, and all the best people of my colony gone. All for nothing, so to speak, for nothing except that sick Tunga."

‘Jehm!’ said Phillips, cutting off his own speech.

After a while Phillips began chatting again. He painted a vivid picture of a new bungalow by the lake, and a new storehouse in Tunga; talked of reduced responsibilities and of the pleasure it would give him to see dear kind Miss Lewis again. From time to time he glanced sideways at Aaron and seemed disappointed, for all the bright prospects of the future did not take away from his master’s face the grave furrows which upset Phillips more than he could have said in straight words.

* * * * *

Day after day went by, but Aaron had not yet returned to Somna. In the meantime she had learned from a boy of the village who had been spying about on his own, that on the other side of the mountain there were many white men building wonderful houses and bringing along wonderful birds and animals. She listened to the boy’s weird descriptions passively.

Was Aaron going to stay on the island, then? she wondered. Was she perhaps to see him again?

She was perplexed; her mind was perturbed by the knowledge of the mysterious progress around her. She almost wished at times that she might never again see the white man who had come and stormed her privacy.

Yet he had a right to come and ask her to account for her part in his godly work. He had not done that yet. Instead he had folded his arms around her and his passion had caused her blood to rise.

To forget herself and to hasten the progress of time she remained now almost continually in the village among the sick and ailing, spending hours with them. She even sought out Marva-rao, who for several days had not come outside his hut and had spent his time seated cross-legged on the matting in the middle of it, gazing before him with dull, lifeless eyes. She had no fear of him. The great chief was like wax in her hands. She was even fond of him and the spell of doom going out from the tattooed savage filled her heart with commiseration.

Doom seemed to spread its fearful atmosphere all over Tunga. There seemed no hope for the miserable village. Yet Somna persisted in her efforts among the savages. If she had suddenly died, Tunga would soon have fallen to pieces.

She isolated the worse cases of sickness, and they were not supposed to have any intercourse with those who were less sick. She insisted upon the huts being swept out and the village street kept clean, and she continued to preach the words of Christ in the chapel. Those whom sickness chained to their homes she visited almost daily. She even buried the dead. Close by the chapel was a little cemetery with nineteen wooden crosses, and there the dead lay, under coral dust so that their fumes should not poison the air.

The protection of God seemed to be upon Somna. None of the filth and disease seemed to affect her. Her feet, though constantly moving over soil impregnated with virulence, remained healthy. Nothing evil could touch her.

"Tata-hita!" was still the cry of the poor wretches in Tunga. But it sounded no longer like a greeting to the rising sun. It was a dull, impotent cry for help, a prayer of souls and bodies drowning in mud.

"Oh, give us, give us! . . . Oh, help us, help us!"

Somna did both give and help and lived for them; never thinking of her own misery, which often seemed almost happiness in comparison with their abundant needs. She hoped and prayed for them, struggling against fate, like a lioness caught in a net. But God did not seem to be helping her. He had sent back the great white man. But the white man had come too late. His work had been destroyed and now he had deserted her.

Where was the white man now? If he were never to return to her? Never! Suddenly she was horrified. He had broken into her privacy, but also into her solitude. Was she to remain alone? Did he wish her to be alone, alone to seek for an end to all the horrors? She buried her face in her hands and groaned, "Oh, God, he scorneth me! He has left me! Is that to be my punishment?"

The great white man had left her, as in her innermost heart she had even hoped he would, because she feared him.

But now a greater fear came upon her. Was he withdrawing for ever his help, his strength, all that she had secretly relied upon; all her hope? Was that to be her punishment?

"And I have cast him away!" she cried. "Oh, great heavenly Father, let not Thy humble servant despair in Thy work. Let not his heart become stone to punish me. Thou knowest I have struggled, but could I prevent the seas from carrying off the work of human hands? Do not take his powerful help away from Thy weak woman, Somna. Send Thou Thy Holy Spirit to him and forgive Thy Somna all sin."

Soon she began to count the days. Her nights became sleepless. Heavy shadows hovered around her eyes.

He did not return.

Then one night she left Mother Sabeth, flung back her head and marched off, upright and firm, to seek Aaron.

She strode towards the mountain, her pale face set. Her huge eyes were dark as the night, and the stars flickered in their tormented depth.

At dawn she arrived near the lake and beheld the wonders of which the boy had told her. She stood still and gazed for a long while, seeming to waver in her decision. Then she shaded her eyes with her hand and looked intently into the sunshine.

A man appeared in the distance. He walked slowly, gravely, with hands folded behind his back, and came towards her. It was proud little Aaron, who day after day had marched up to the mountain intending to go to see her, but had been unable to get over his pride. Now he saw her, and his dignity changed to fierce excitement. He hastened towards her; but when he came up to her he did not know what to say, or how to behave.

Somna fell on her knees before him.

He could not believe his eyes.

"Dearest," she said, so intensely that his heart almost stood still. "Thou hast cause to scorn Somna. Thou doest it cruelly. Let thou Somna suffer for the destruction of thy work, do not thou let Tunga suffer. If I displease thine eyes, do not let Tunga displease thee also. Help, great white man, help thou the souls in misery. Let not thy wrath destroy

them, as it destroys me. I will suffer, I will die. But let Tunga live."

"So help me damn well, God!" Aaron burst out, terrified. "Somna, child! Is that why you have come to see me? God Almighty! What a funny lot of humanity we all are! Get up, quick!" He helped her to her feet. "You almost killed me. I thought something terrible had happened, Marva-rao or some one . . ."

He made a quick, nervous gesture, as if to banish that name at once.

"Whatever makes you think I scorn you or that I am going to desert Tunga? I told you, I have not come with empty hands. My heart and soul belong to the island, to the islanders, and to you. All I do at this moment is with the one object of helping you, of making you happier and helping that seedy lot of savages. When I told you how much I care for you, Somna, you pushed me away. You called me sinful. Well, what else can I do but keep away from you? I'm sinful, but I can be just as good as you, if need be. I can even prove it to you."

Aaron spoke with bitterness, remembering his own sufferings, and whilst he did so her tall figure swayed to and fro; the blood retreated from her cheeks; her eyes closed and he only realised that she had become faint when she broke down at his feet. Then he was suddenly seized with anguish, lifted her in his arms, and with quick, sturdy steps paced away towards the bungalow.

"Here comes the master!" cried Phillips. "Lord in heaven! He's carrying Miss Lewis in his arms!"

All downed tools for a moment and ran to assist Aaron.

"Quiet, men!" said Aaron with dignity. "Miss Lewis is alive, but she is ill. I'll take her to my bungalow."

He bore her along, and the men followed him quietly, like idiots.

* * * * *

When Aarons left his bungalow to take temporary lodgings with his crew, he said to himself, not without pride:

"She can't do without me; she is in my care again."

He was also proud of his medical achievements, for he had bathed Somna's feet and hands and covered them with boracic powder. She lay upon his camp bed quite still, like a broken flower. Aaron said to her:

"Now, don't talk, dear child; just rest, and for the future trust to me."

She did trust him, and at last found sleep.

Phillips set out with four men and a stretcher in order to fetch Mother Sabeth.

The men's eyes gleamed when they saw Tunga from afar off. But there was something stronger at work in them than the naked brute. Aaron had spoken to them, man to man; and Ben Philpot was a living proof of the truth of his words. Now they knew what would be the result of any intercourse with the natives they were afraid and tried to stifle their secret longings. But this enforced abstinence cast a shadow over their stay on the deadly island, and made them long to get away from it. Aaron had forgotten to consider that.

* * * * *

The *Baby Lily* sailed away from the island. Her master was paid £200 in gold by Mr. West and entrusted with the care of mad Ben Philpot, with instructions to deliver him at a lunatic asylum in 'Frisco. Aaron wrote letters to his solicitor in London, to Uhland Wright, to Betty, to his bankers and his shipping agents, which he handed to the master of the *Baby Lily*. Philpot was dragged into a special cabin, which had been padded with every imaginable soft thing and all the spare canvas that could be found, and he soon began yelling out for Dorothy and the wonderful lady for all he was worth. It stung Aaron to the quick to hear him, and turned the crew nearly sick. The *Baby Lily* fellows, looking grim and rugged, called out their last salute. For several days their schooner hung about on the horizon and at last evaporated below the water-line.

Several weeks passed.

Aaron made an expedition to the eastern part of the island and discovered the source of the sulphur vapours. There was a crack in the side of the mountain, large enough to con-

tain a good-sized London house, around which the rocks had been wildly tossed about. Thick, yellowish white smoke issued thence with infernal uproar, and was divided by lazy currents of air. The sight of it made Aaron fear that some day a volcano might burst open somewhere else on the island; perhaps on the very spot where he had built bungalows, pig-sties, fowl runs and all kinds of outbuildings. The lake on the borders of which his colony was huddled together was a mystery to him. He had sunk the lead to a depth of one hundred and seventy fathoms and it had not grounded. The ocean around the island was only a few fathoms deep, so he was led to think that the lake was a dead crater, reaching down into the bowels of the earth. Yet it was full of fresh water. How could all that fresh water have got there, in a latitude where it hardly ever rained? Was it possible, thought Aaron, that that deep, silent lake whence issued a happy little stream, was but the hypocritical surface of a monster, the little stream the tears of a crocodile?

His pride in beholding his colony from across the lake often changed into uncanny fear. He would say to himself:

"There live Somna, and Mother Sabeth, there I live, and there Phillips and the men. But if the ground were to rock one day? If those millions of gallons of water in the lake were to spout skyward, and fire come spitting from underneath? If the island were to sink down and the Pacific to suck it in for all eternity?" Such thoughts made him shudder.

"Not in my time," he would console himself. "Those huge trees have taken centuries to grow, and it will probably be centuries before such a catastrophe happens. Such a thing might happen to England, to Europe, to all the world one day. Anything might occur in the universe. Is anything regarded by great scientists as impossible? Is there anything that God could not cause to happen? Is not everything in the world in a transitory stage? Surely there comes an end to all things that means but the beginning of new things."

After such meditations, which generally took place in the evening, Aaron would fold his arms behind his back and walk over to Somna's bungalow to bid good-night to her and Mother Sabeth. Sometimes he sat up with her and she read to him

from the Bible until he felt he could stay no longer so close to her so late at night.

One night they sat together, only a yard apart from each other, the flickering rays of a candle lighting up their faces. They had been in Tunga that day and had just come back.

"Mother Sabeth is asleep," Somna said. "Wilt thou drink some milk, dearest?"

"No, thank you, Somna," said Aaron. "I am neither hungry nor thirsty. I seem to have lost all bodily sensation."

"Art thou ill?" she inquired.

The candle-light shook in the light breath of the wind and made her grave face look strange, almost eerie, to Aaron. She gazed at him with a stern scrutiny which made him feel restless and uneasy, almost ashamed for a moment.

"Art thou ill?" she repeated.

"No, dearest Somna, I am not ill in body."

She pressed her palms against her hips and a thin line appeared on her forehead.

"But I believe thou art ill," she said. "Tell me if it is not so."

Aaron smoothed his short, dark beard, and after a moment's hesitation, said:

"I am tired—tired to death. Bara-toi died yesterday. Tenania has married Marva-rao. After all our work among those savages, this is the result. They die like flies. A doom seems to hang over Tunga. And what do we do? What do I do? I take my medicine chest with me and try to cure their manifold ills."

"They thank thee for it, dearest," said Somna.

"Maybe," he continued. "At one time I was happy to see their eyes when I anointed their sores. But now I only wish every time I do such a thing that death might deliver the sufferers in the dark. The words of Christ fall on their ears with irony. I think of myself and the good I try to do, Somna, and I doubt whether I do any good at all."

He stopped and waited for some words from her, but she remained silent.

"Oh, why are you so calm?" he continued. Then with a rising voice: "What is it that keeps you so calm?"

"My heart is as stone for sorrow," she said, in a deep voice. "But God still lives."

"Would you weep if I were to die?" he inquired.

"If God took thy life away, I should think he needed thee," she replied.

"Yes—but would you cry?" he insisted, with rising vigour.

"I have cried for thee whilst thou art alive," she said openly, "I would cry for thee when thou art gone."

"But you would not feel more lonely than you are now?" he asked.

"Thou canst never be lonely with God," she said firmly. A look of pain crept into Aaron's eyes; she saw it, and added quickly, "I will pray for thee not to die before Somna."

"Supposing," he went on, "that all the people of Tunga were dead, would you come to a new world with me? Would you leave this wretched island with me—and Mother Sabeth, of course?"

"I would not leave where God has put me. I would wait till He called away my spirit."

"Then you believe that God has cast you on this island to live and to die here?" he asked, in dull despair.

She looked at him calmly and said:

"Dost thou not believe it?"

"I don't know what I believe and what I don't believe," grunted Aaron, with a faint note of rage. "Christ says: 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.' That fits me exactly; I shall not find rest until my death. Then perhaps I shall have the great peace which life has never offered me—never."

Somna rose softly and came up to Aaron. She laid her broad palm on his curly head, and said:

"Christ says: 'No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God.'"

Aaron closed his eyes, clasped her wrist, and pressed her hand on his head.

"Your words give me peace," he murmured. "But how long will it last?"

Somna looked almost fanatical for a moment. In her soul,

she was trying to urge on the man to follow the Saviour's example. The desire to do God's work possessed her whole being, and she strove to give Aaron some of her strength by laying her hand on him. But she gave him only a moment's bliss, and when she took her hand away he opened his eyes and said:

"It's gone!"

"What is gone?"

"Happiness, Somna. I only feel it when I feel you. Oh, how I long——"

"For what?" she asked him gently.

"Oh, God, I can't tell you!" he exclaimed, almost fiercely.

"If I did, you would hate me!"

And suddenly he sprang up and hastened away to his bungalow.

* * * * *

Ceaseless work in the heat soon began to tell on Aaron. When he rose up in the morning and looked across the dark lake, he felt strangely inert. Nevertheless, every two days he undertook the journey to Tunga with Somna, which meant a walk of ten hours, and then the work in addition. Three children, two young boys, about seven or eight years old, and a baby girl aged two years, had been taken from the colony to save them from disease. One boy stayed in Aaron's bungalow, the other with the crew. Somna had at first taken charge of the baby, but when she went to Tunga she left it with Phillips, who became attached to the little girl and began to talk about adopting her. After a few days he proposed to Aaron to keep her altogether, and swore a terrible oath that he would bring up the abandoned little olive-coloured worm and take her home to his wife. Aaron spoke to Somna and she agreed.

About the boy who lived with the crew he was rather sceptical, seeing what terrible manners the young fellow had. For he could not bear the touch of linen on his skin, and with pagan obstinacy tore off anything that was put on him. Besides, he was almost an idiot.

Aaron's boy was more docile. He knew all Tunga, but knew neither his father nor his mother. There was a good

deal of sweetness in his young nature, but unfortunately he already showed signs of disease. He knew Somna very well. It was he who had told her about the "wonder things." He performed certain small duties of which Aaron had to remind him almost daily, and delighted in taking the eggs from the "wonder birds," as he called the hens.

Aaron began to suffer from insomnia. Often, especially when the moon was intense, he could get no rest. Then he sat on the verandah of his bungalow and gazed westward towards Somna's house.

"To-morrow," he said to himself, "off you go again to Tunga with Somna. Same thing again. On and on! You live, grow older, and you'll die in the end. Nothing happens to you. You are spending your life for others. Where will you find happiness?"

One day, when morning dawned he had not slept a wink. He saw Somna coming along with a light, energetic step. She was dressed in a scarlet silk wrapper which he had made her accept as a present. She had wound it tightly around her body and its colour contrasted happily with her ivory skin, her black, glossy hair and strange eyes. Aaron left the bungalow and said:

"Good-morning, Somna."

"Peace be with thee, dearest," she replied, with a sweet smile, her eyes looking inquisitively into Aaron's dark face.

They walked off towards the mountain, past the bungalow where Phillips and the crew were snoring in their morning sleep, while the olive-coloured babe shrieked vainly for the condensed Swiss milk.

Late in the evening they wandered homeward side by side, with little space between them. Aaron moved along with the mechanical energy of a machine that has to fulfil a certain function in a given time; Somna very humanly, her arms swinging to and fro, her well-shaped hips following the rhythmic movement of her legs.

The setting sun spread a last flush upon their countenances. Aaron looked seasoned, tired and unhappy. Pearls of sweat poured down his sun-burned face and fell through his wide-open shirt on to his shaggy chest. He looked like a labourer

who has nothing to expect from life but toil and trouble, and she appeared strange and exotic by his side. A world of contrasts lay between them. Her skin took the hue of deep gold, and her scarlet silk wrapper seemed like a living flame enveloping her. Her eyes, full of guarded coldness, the upright poise of her head with its abundant black hair, her meditative brows and finely chiselled mouth and nostrils displayed the utmost feminine vigour.

They had nothing to say to each other. Their day's work was done. From time to time Aaron stood still to rest for a while, and his eyes surveyed the woman with a dull sort of glare, expressive of nothing but hopelessness. But deep down in his soul was a question which he never asked in words, of which he was perhaps not even conscious. Somna, however, saw it in his eyes, and as if driven by a hidden instinct she spurred the man to hurry homeward.

They emerged from the zone of sulphur vapour when the bold light of day had given way to the moon and her mysteries of shrouded shadows. Then Aaron stood still once more, wiped his brow with the back of his hand, tore his shirt open wider to let the air rush to his burning skin, and felt that he could not go any further. So he simply said:

"I am tired!" and flung himself on the ground, resting his head upon his forearms, and repeating, "I am tired!"

Somna simply said, "Art thou?" Then she seated herself close beside him and drew up her knees in order to rest her chin upon them.

A long silence followed, during which they thought of each other and of the work that bound them together with invisible ties. Aaron stared at a little stone of odd shape just before him; Somna from time to time turned her head towards him to observe him with sad eyes full of nervous inquiry.

"It is all of no use," he said suddenly, and there was tragic lament in his voice. "We are both clinging to a sinking ship. When will it sink?"

"Rest thou for a while, and pray thou," she replied, almost coldly. "Thou wilt soon be home."

"I am tired, but my mind is awake. I will pray, but I shall never be happy—never!"

He sighed.

"Thou dost not know thy days to come."

"I can only judge from the present. A little while ago all seemed sunshine. I was happy, but it has all gone now. Is it my fault?"

He waited for her to say something, but she remained silent.

"I have failed in everything in my life," he continued in a low, plaintive voice. "I am like civilisation that has sprung from a divine idea and worked itself all over the world and—failed. It fails in the individual as it fails in the masses. It has failed in me." He paused, then added, "And it carries destruction."

"What dost thou call civilisation?" she inquired.

"Myself—you—everybody who knows good from evil is a member of it."

"Thou canst not surely call Somna a member of civilisation. My father I remember saying we were out of civilisation."

"If you prefer it, let it be so. It is truly an advantage to be out of it. Civilisation is the cloak of the age. It hides the same old sinful Adam. It does little for the heart. As for the soul—it kills it."

Aaron paused for a long while, wondering whether Somna could fully grasp the meaning of his words.

"Do all white men think as thou dost?" she asked abruptly.

"They do not, or they would all go away and live in the wilderness. Most of them cannot do that because they are slaves. Civilised men are slaves to one another."

"Are civilised women the same?"

"Truly, I can't tell you," he replied, glancing round at her eyes that were fixed upon him with intensity. "I have known no civilised woman, except you. All the women I have ever known were savages at heart. No—worse than that!"

"Thine own mother?" she said with reproach.

"My mother died when I was quite young, Somna, only a little boy. I hardly knew her."

"Thy mother was a godly woman," she said, with firmness.

Aaron kept silence, staring at the oddly shaped stone. That

which was hidden deep down in him now began to take shape. It stirred Somna, so much that she looked about her feverishly like an animal scenting danger in the air. She almost wished to go away and leave Aaron. But she could not find strength to depart from him.

"I have failed in everything I have tried to do in my life," continued Aaron, with melancholy. "I shall fail here in Tunga, too. God does not want my work. I know it is because I am selfish, and in all I do I care for myself, if not for my body, then for my soul. I cannot sufficiently detach myself from the world ever to attain my aims. I shall remain selfish for ever." Somna's features turned earnest, almost hard.

"Thou art scolding God because thou art not happy. Endure thou, and remember Christ," she said.

"I am not happy," he continued, unperturbed by her reproach. "Happiness! what is it? A dream, a false state of living, a holding on to perishable goods. One may be happy in theory, but when the theory is overthrown happiness vanishes again. I believe that we human beings are not meant for happiness in this world. We are meant to suffer. Pain is the only positive state of things. It makes us all equal."

"I believe thy words," she said, in an almost colourless voice. "Jesus Christ suffered and died. But He was happy afterwards. We shall be happy afterwards."

"I cannot believe that God means it to be like this. He has given us more concrete things to thrive on than hope. I believe that a great part in us is left to ourselves for the shaping of our destinies. We have a free will, haven't we? Does that not justify us in using it? Do we not use it, for good and for evil? And may we not use it for happiness' sake?"

"But thy will can be governed by a greater power than thyself," she replied, in a deep, singing voice that seemed to soothe Aaron.

"That is so," he replied, as if carried away by the idea. "And that to me is the mystery of life, how the will is governed by a greater power. Mine has always been governed by

it, hence all my life is a failure. That's what comes of renouncing the powers that God gives to us all."

"It is not so, if God directs thy will."

"It is all the same. I don't know God. You don't know Him. We just believe in His Almighty presence and power and we just act according to the degree in which this idea inspires us."

He paused, swallowed, and continued bitterly:

"And *that* brings no happiness. Our present life is perishable. Yet it contains the very essence of eternity, which is life itself. I cannot believe that God means us to cling to nothing but the spirit. If so, why should we take food and drink? Why should we sleep? Why should He so closely connect body and soul? I remember how a long time ago you proved to me God's existence by a mere movement of your finger. How could you be sure of God, if He did not manifest Himself in your body?"

He paused again and said with increased bitterness:

"Your theory is unreal, unnatural. It is arrogance."

"Why dost thou tell me that?" asked Somna, with sudden swiftness in her speech. "If thou art unhappy, ask thou God to help thee, not Somna, who is not happy herself. Somna does not ask *thee* for happiness."

Aaron sat up. The moonlight fell upon his features. His mouth was half open and his white teeth clenched, as if he wished to suppress the pain of some torture.

"I will not add my unhappiness to yours," he said. "I know your life is a torment. I know you are burdened with sorrows. I admire you. Your strength, your courage, your goodness. God bless you for it all. You have changed my whole life. All my soul has been transfigured by you."

He paused, as if to stop himself from being carried away, and then added with stinging bitterness:

"Nevertheless, I have failed in everything and gained nothing. I suppose that is God's justice."

"Thou wilt fail . . . I feel it . . . unless thou wilt return to God. Free thy soul from sin and thou wilt surely be happy, and succeed within thyself."

"I cannot, Somna. It is misery to live unnaturally. The

only real food for a soul is love. Without it life is nothing. I don't care what you say. Real love is the only real happiness there is."

She drew herself away from him.

"Then my heart spoke the truth," she said bitterly. "Thou art not what I once thought thee to be. Thou *hast* cast away God for worldly ideas, and thou *art* sinful."

"I have not!" cried Aaron in despair. "I have suffered for God and worked for God. You say I have failed in my love for Him. Maybe! But I will not fail in my love for you. I will not! I will be happy at last."

"Thou hast not mistaken my heart?" she asked, quivering with inward excitement, and with a trembling voice. "Thou surely knowest that I do not wish thee to give up thy life for me?"

"Do you think," asked Aaron, with a wild gesture, "that I have travelled thousands of miles, that I have become good for the sake of Christ? So help me God, no! There's yet humanity in me. I am no saint—I am a sinner—I've always said so. But you choose to be a saint, and are as cold as ice to me. Your words wound me every time you speak. Look what I have done, ruined myself, wrecked my whole life. Is that only for Christ? Christ? No! It's for you! And I will be happy. I will, for once in my life. I will, if I've got to sit in hell for ever after!"

He saw her eyes fixed on him like two devouring flames.

"Thou hast the heart of a savage," she exclaimed, almost fiercely. "Thou art a slave, and evil will befall thee."

"I'm not!" cried Aaron, losing his self-control by degrees. "Why has God made me like this? Nowhere am I happy—nowhere can I rest. Why has He brought me on to this sick island? That I may be tortured to death, tortured as He has tortured me from the very first moment I set eyes on you? No, no! I love you, Somna, and mine you shall be, mine you are."

He stretched his arm out for her, but she escaped him and sprang to her feet.

Aaron also sprang up.

The tone of Somna's voice became hard, oppressed, haunted.

"Indeed thou art a savage!" she said. "Thou hast travelled thousands of miles for me and thou callest it love? I see thee clear as the day. Thou art not driven by God. Thy passions carry thee over the oceans."

"Not driven by God!" exclaimed Aaron desperately. "Look what I have done for Tunga!"

"Thou art untruthful," she continued, not heeding his interruption. "Have I asked thee to come to this island? Truly I believed that God had sent thee, and asked thee to help poor Tunga in the spirit of Christ. And thou hast done it all for me! I do not know thee. Thou art a stranger. I do not know thy life. But thou art full of untruth. If thou knowest good from evil, thou must know that. Hast thou not a wife, beautiful and kind as an angel? How canst thou think of Somna?" She turned her face away abruptly and covered it with her palms. "Oh, I know thee now!" she exclaimed passionately. "Thou art a savage also."

Aaron began to look terrible.

"My wife!" he hissed under his breath, with a curse. "What do I owe to that miserable woman? Is that what troubles your innocent heart? I suppose you would condescend to love me if you had never seen that woman. Who told you she was my wife? Your own savage blood, I suppose. Lord, yes, she is my wife up to this present moment, and damn her!"

Here Aaron stopped, trying to recover his mental balance. But he had gone too far, and was no longer master of himself.

"I have not told you any lies. I have a wife, but she is a savage at heart, worse, she is the incarnate devil. She has clung to me like the devil, and she held me in her power until I met you. Now I have cast her away. I have finished with her. I have forgotten her. She is dead to me. She has been dead to me since I met you again. Oh, Somna! I have been good. I have fought all through my life, and I have been ruined. The mere sight of you made a new man of me. But I cannot become a saint. I will not! Somna, I am starving. You madden me!"

"Thou art bad, white man!" she cried, in pale anger. "Thou

hast deceived me, as thou hast lied to thine own wife. Thou hast talked to me about God, and hast never left the darkness of sin. Oh, it cannot be so, it cannot! Thou canst not be so evil. Truly thou hast been good. Thou has been my dearest friend. Thou hast helped me. Thou hast been generous. Be thou generous once more with thyself, and conquer the evil of thy passion. Conquer thou!"

She held up her hand in blessing.

"I have done with conquering sin," said Aaron intensely. "I am alone in this world. I have no one to love me, nowhere to lay my head. I cannot feed only on the love of God for ever. I have no fear of God. You ask me to be generous. But my heart is on fire, and you have made it like that. Somna! I ask you, I beg you—be human!"

He grasped her by the arms, and tried to draw her close to him.

She made a violent jerk to free herself. Her eyes looked haunted by terror.

"By God, I conjure thee to let me go, and henceforth to leave me! Go thou! Take thy ship and sail away. I cannot love man. God commands."

"I care nothing for God's commands," cried Aaron. "If I take to my ship, I'll take you with me. I will be happy for once."

He tightened his grip, and growled.

"Yes, wriggle out of my grip, woman, if you can! A woman, a beautiful woman, is all you are. And the spirit that lives in you I love, too. You can't get away now!"

But Somna's blood rose with volcanic violence. She struggled out of his grasp and ran, stumbled, fell, rose up again and raced away like a deer.

The demon was in Aaron. He chased behind her like a tornado. He caught her by her scarlet wrapper and tore it off. Then with a bound he sprang on her, and seized her by the waist.

She caught him by the throat. She tried to strangle him, to bite him.

Still Aaron held her.

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And whilst the moon travelled serenely through the night, they wrestled with each other. The satellite smiled grimly and coldly upon the violent passions of the wrestlers.

They breathed hard, like fighting animals. The man conquered. The woman broke in his hands.

Chapter XXIV

Some weeks later Aaron sat out on the verandah. His legs were swollen and his feet were sore from his journeys to Tunga. He was alone. Somna had gone over to Tunga with Sanders in his stead. But she was due to return soon. Evening was drawing near. Aaron was stretched out in a canvas chair with an open book on his knees, looking extremely placid, and he seemed all the more happy for his present bodily sufferings. From time to time he surveyed the horizon with an expression of ecstasy which made him look almost sheepish. He was aware that his sky of happiness was clear and he gave himself up, body and soul, to the novel state of serenity. Yet, looking over to the other bungalows, there came into his eyes a flash of fear, an uncertain look as if he did not altogether trust his happiness. But he was fanatically determined that, whatever happened, he would remain happy.

Just then Master Phillips walked past, smoking his pipe and saluting Mr. West rather coldly. A whiff of smoke went up Aaron's nose and made him strongly fancy some tobacco. He longed to take again to what he had for some time considered a useless minor vice.

"Here, Phillips," he cried out, "just a minute! Got some tobacco you can spare?"

The captain suddenly stood still, as if considering whether to go on without taking any notice of Aaron, or whether to turn back. He followed the second impulse and went up to Mr. West.

"How's your legs?" he inquired off-handedly.

"Much better, thank you," said Aaron, with a placid smile. "I fancy a smoke."

Phillips looked incredulous, then quite unconcerned. Why shouldn't Mr. West take to smoking again, take to anything he liked as far as he, Phillips, was concerned? He offered Aaron a black Manilla, saying:

"Sorry! I've only got that on me, but you're welcome to it."

Aaron took the cigar—the first for many months—looking like a man with a bad conscience.

"I've sworn never to take to these again," he said, confidently. "But I don't know whether I can keep my oath."

"If you've only sworn a thing to yourself," replied Phillips, "it don't much matter if you commit perjury."

Aaron thought there was veiled contempt in this speech. He also fancied there was a note of displeasure in Phillips's general demeanour towards him. Surely Phillips treated him coldly, no longer with the almost affectionate kind of respect to which he had become accustomed. It sounded almost like the Phillips of yore talking to the Aaron of yore in the days when they had first navigated the rough seas together. Aaron thought for a while, holding the cigar in his fingers, then he gave it back to the captain, saying:

"I won't smoke. I'll keep my oath. There you are—thanks. Sit here for a while and chat until my wife returns."

"I've got them pigs to feed yet and to give my babe her night milk," answered Phillips, who did not seem anxious to keep Aaron company.

"Never mind," urged Aaron. "I want to talk to you. You seem so different lately, the lot of you. What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, only all has changed."

"Everything in the world changes, Phillips, all is in a passing stage."

"I'd rather I wasn't. Except, perhaps, for my stay on this 'ere island."

"Why? Ar'n't you satisfied?"

"It's no use talking. I'm not; we ain't!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothin' the matter, but we got wives at home who wants

to see us every now and then. There's nothin' doin' 'ere. All is different from what we thought it would be. I wants to get 'ome with me babe one of these days. I wants to settle down and have a 'ome for a change."

The placid expression disappeared from Aaron's face.

"I know, I know," he grunted. "I can see now."

He looked sullen, and began thinking.

Phillips went away without ceremony, and walked slowly towards the crew's bungalow like a man who carries with him responsibility and know how to support it. Aaron did not try to call him back.

His simple statement that he and "them fellows" were sick of the island filled Aaron with apprehension. That the dissatisfaction of one of his men could in such a measure interfere with his well-earned happiness distressed him and caused him anxiety. Now he remembered telling Somna that happiness was an illusory state of living, a holding on to perishable goods. Only a short time ago he had believed that human beings were not meant by God to be happy. And here he had been holding on to happiness, enjoying it in its fullest measure for weeks. His old theory had already outlived itself.

Somna came striding along towards the bungalow. Sanders walked by her side, and Aaron greeted them with a broad smile. On the steps she bade Sanders "Good-night" and he went away with a shy, sideward glance, hardly returning Aaron's "Good-night, Sanders." Somna looked at her husband with quiet earnestness; he kissed her, and she sat down close to him, tired and silent.

He eyed her with curious concern, and thought she looked a little haggard around her neck and cheeks. Her collar bones protruded, her eyes shone with exotic brilliancy. There was a dryness about them, suggesting that she could never shed a tear. As he beheld her intense femininity, Aaron looked quite sheepish for a moment; then a proud smile curled his lips under his beard. He felt the bliss of being the proprietor of such an exquisite pearl, such a soul and spirit as lived in such a woman. Poor Aaron was but a man; he knew his treasure as he had made it, but he did not know

it as it was in itself. It was doubtful if he would have recognised it if he had known it. His will was bent his own way, and bent her will, too.

"Poor Somna," he thought, "she is suffering from her long journeys. I must do something to make that easier."

His beautiful wife sat very quiet. In her tired eyes was the expression of a soul that lived in bondage. But love-drunken little Aaron could read nothing but love in them. He knew not that he had stolen from her a vast and indefinable something, he knew not how strange life had suddenly become to her, how she suffered. Her struggle was invisible. After that fateful night, she had gone to Mother Sabeth with chattering teeth. She had prayed as she had never prayed before, in all her life, whilst Aaron had stretched himself out to rest with the placid smile of a conqueror. When for two days she had refused to see him, he had smiled, and during that time had wandered about in paradise.

He did not know what Somna had renounced when she said to Mother Sabeth:

"It is wise, and God wills it so, that thou and I shall go and live henceforth with Brother Aaron."

He had beamed with delight when she had come to him to announce in deadly earnest:

"I will be thy wife for ever. I carry thy life within me, and God wills it so."

He had opened his arms and kissed the tearless eyes in ecstasy; he had fallen on his knees and thanked the Almighty for his overwhelming bliss. He wished for no more than that she should belong to him, as much as he belonged to her. Love was all he wanted.

"Somna," said Aaron now pensively, "Phillips told me to-night that he wishes to go away to his wife, and the others no doubt want to go, too. If they force the point, shall we go with them?"

She turned slowly towards him.

"Go thou, husband," she answered, "but thy wife must stay where God has put her."

"Yes, but supposing we took Mother Sabeth with us."

"Mother cannot go—Tunga cannot go. I leave thee thine own choice, if thou wilt go."

"Now, supposing we, you and I were alone on this island, would you come with me?"

"I am thy wife where God has given me to thee. Do not argue His will with thy wishes."

Aaron brooded for a little while, then asked:

"Do you love me, really?"

She said nothing, but her eyes became full of affectionate reproach.

"I know," he said, "I know,"—as if he were punished by her look. "Well, I tell you—if my men want to go, I'll let them go, and I'll stay here with you alone. You are all—you and my faith in God—that is worth living for. I'll let them go and stay here with you alone. I swear it to you."

"Bind thyself to thy faith more than to me," she said. "God is for ever and ever, and I am mortal and sinful."

"Sinful?" said Aaron, whispering, as if questioning himself.

She nodded silently.

"Have I made you so?"

"There is no one good but one, that is God," she said.

Then they both gazed into the evening. There was little room between them. Nature had coupled them tightly. But the aims of the one were of the world, the other's were of Heaven. The universe lay between them.

Before them stretched the deep waters of the lake, the graceful woods of casuarina, the lagoon, the distant ocean, behind them towered the mountain, and on the other side of it was the village, whence invisible arms were stretched up to Heaven for commiseration from the Almighty who made the world and all that is in it.

Nature rested peacefully.

"Come thou into the house, dearest," said Somna with her melancholy voice. "I will bathe thy feet, and mother needs her food and drink. To-morrow I will rest with thee."

She put her beautiful arm around his shoulders and helped him into the bungalow.

"My feet will be quite all right again to-morrow," he said

tenderly. "After to-morrow I will go to Tunga alone, and you shall take a day off. You need it."

He kissed her with timid affection and they went in.

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When the time came to go to Tunga, Aaron's feet were still sore and tender.

"I do not seem to have the same recuperative powers as I used to have," he said to his young wife. "I could not possibly walk across the mountain, and you also look tired. Mother Sabeth is very ill. Her temperature is up all the time. I think we had better stop here for once and not go."

She gazed at him as if she wanted to read his soul. Something new and foreign in his eyes seemed to alarm her. There was no spirit in his words; his voice sounded dull and resigned; and she felt as if Tunga were days away, and as if she ought to remain with him. A deep-down fear of something unexpected about to happen made her say:

"I will stay with thee. Thine eyes command me."

After the heat of the day they went for a walk round the lake. Intemperate laughter and a shrill tune whistled by some one came from the crew's bungalow. It sounded disorderly, inharmonious, and Aaron was unconsciously affected by it. Was it not as if discipline and respect had vanished from the circle of his men? He thought that hostile eyes were gazing at him and his wife as he walked along, leaning upon her, past the bungalow and the outbuildings.

"You know, I shall have to speak to my men," he said, in a low voice. "I shall have to let them go. They feel that their time is being wasted here. So I'm going to do it. But I shall stay here with you."

She was silent, and he was a little irritated not to hear her say how highly she valued his decision and his unselfishness. It made him bitter.

"It will be my last failure," he added. "When they have gone, I shall never see them again. I have nothing more left in the world."

After a little while he became tired of walking, and sat

down to rest. He gazed sadly into the deep lake and a shiver seized him.

"Life is like this deep water," he said, "it has no ground. One does not know why it is here. It often seems unreal. To-night it seems to me as if the whole world were unreal. I feel as if even I were unreal. Yet I feel the pain of life. Somna, dearest wife, somehow I shudder when I think of to-morrow. It looks black. It's not weakness, no, no. It's that feeling of being disrupted from the outer world, being enclosed within narrow limits—to be alone with my love. Do you know what it means?"

She seemed to be agitated by his eyes more than by his words.

"Husband," she said, "thy happiness is then but a dream. God has not given to thee His greatest gift; nor to me. I pray thee, go with thy men and leave me behind. I cannot accept thy sacrifice." She turned her sad eyes away, and murmured, "I fear His wrath."

"Why do you say that?" asked Aaron, gripping her arm tightly for a moment. "Look what we have done. We have built God a little kingdom in the midst of this hell. We give up our lives to Him. Look at me. I am going to choose my own fate and remain here. That is how much I trust God. So do not say that again. He is good and His love is divine. Why should one fear Him? Whatever may happen to me——" He paused and then held her gently round the neck. "As to my going away, I would rather die than leave you. Why do you shiver, Somna? Do you——"

"Thy hands are cold, like thy words," she said. "Come thou in and rest with me."

She led him slowly homeward.

"It is wonderful, sweet love," he said, with sadness. "I lean against you, and feel how strong you are. Love is given to us by God," he added emphatically. "I could never be lonely with you, never. I shall always feel warm and at home when I rest my head against your breast and hear the beating of your heart. I feel the strength that goes out from you so much. It makes me feel vital, and I think it's meant

to be so. I think I have yet great things to do in life. That is God's will. Everything is."

The little walk seemed to have tired him very much and the weight of his body rested heavily against his brave young wife. When they returned home, he said:

"I think I must go and rest. I feel as if I could not stand on my feet any longer."

She kept by his side, her eyes, strained wide open, looking at him with dog-like faithfulness whilst she helped him to lie down. His head sank back heavily and he sighed.

"Oh, it is wonderful to be cared for by you. The merest touch of your hand thrills me."

"I will let thee rest," she said, and stroked his hair from his massive forehead. "I will go to mother now and return to thee again. Dost thou want food and drink?"

"Give me a cup of water and put in it two of my pills," he said. "And just let me hold your hand for a minute. That is nice. You are so warm. Now, give me a kiss. I feel quite happy now, quite, so don't worry. I shall be quite all right to-morrow, and look upon the world brightly once more. God bless you."

He closed his eyes.

She stood gazing at him, still feeling the cold, clammy touch of his hands. She kissed his broad forehead gently and then she went to Mother Sabeth to prepare for her the nightly bed of suffering.

During the night Aaron was attacked by fever. He complained of a pain in his loins. When morning dawned he looked flushed and bewildered.

"Please go and ask Phillips to come round," he said to his wife.

She went.

"Wilt thou come to my husband?" she said to the captain through the open window. "He wants thee."

Then she returned to Aaron's bedside and gazed at him, puzzled. Aaron's eyes hung on her, as if he wondered who she was and what she was doing there.

Master Phillips entered.

"What's up?" he asked curtly.

"I don't feel at all well," replied Aaron in a hard, dreary voice. "I have a swelling on my side and a hot head. My feet are like lumps of ice."

Phillips's face underwent a sudden transformation. There was silence during which he seemed to be thinking. For a moment it was as if he assumed a superior position, drawing up his figure as if to throw off some load from his back. Then authority came into his frame.

"Well," he said then, "what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," replied Aaron slowly.

Somna left the room, as if some one had ordered her to do so.

Phillips looked intent.

"What's the matter?" he asked again, with more anxiety than he intended to show.

"Nothing much," replied Aaron, with an effort. "I must talk to you. It has been coming on all the time. I didn't know it. I don't know what it is now. But it's serious. I feel as if I were going to die."

"And that's why you call to me, when you want some tobacco, or when you want to die. That's the time to remember us."

"Don't talk so loud, I don't want my wife to hear it all."

"How do you know you are going to die?" asked Phillips, staring at him uncertainly.

"I feel as if I was. I can't eat, can't sleep, and I have a lump in my side sticking out as large as my fist."

"Show us!" said Phillips, in a low voice.

When he had inspected it, his manner changed and became more serious.

"I've called you here," said Aaron, "while there's still time. I've seen stronger men than myself swept away in no time. You want to get home with the others. That's the point. I have made up my mind. You shall go. Get the *Amadea* ready and sail away whenever you like. I'll sign her over to you. You shall have her. I don't care. I remain here. Leave all the stores here that you don't want, and you are free now. I'm sorry I took you all away from home. You may think it was under false pretences, but I'll swear it wasn't."

Phillips thought his master looked very helpless and muttered an oath.

"I don't think ye quite know me, Mr. West," he said. "Ye may know Jesus Christ, but let me tell you, sir, I'm as stunning a sportsman as He was. I don't mind telling you, we're all sick of this place, stickin' about with nothin' to do, an' lookin' on. I don't begrudge you your happiness, but if yer think I'm goin' to leave ye here to die after over a dozen years of honourable acquaintance, you're wrong. I'm goin' to see ye through and well, and then we'll all go. That's my conception of the business."

Aaron shook his head wearily.

"I appreciate your feelings. I made no mistake in you. But this is a matter for me to decide. And you speak only for yourself. You haven't asked the others. They are all human beings and have minds of their own. If you will be a friend to me, accept my offer. As regards myself, I can't do better than to keep on taking those pills. Now, go and think about it."

Phillips went, with his head sunk upon his chest.

Towards mid-day the fever increased and began to shake Aaron. No doubt a complicated, perhaps a deadly illness had set in.

In another room Mother Sabeth lay quite still, creeping along on her last lap. Death seemed suddenly to engulf the house, and in its silence Somna went from mother to husband, with a forlorn, helpless pair of eyes staring out of her head, as if for once she had lost all control and was just borne along by fate.

Phillips came back again in the afternoon to speak to Aaron, but he found it was impossible to do so. So he went away again. His bearing seemed more upright and manly. The first thing he said to the crew was:

"Remember, we are Christian gentlemen."

And this seemed to encourage him as well as the others. They all began to talk in whispers, and became super-anxious about their own destinies.

Their captain had not yet decided upon a line of action. Instinctively he kept himself back, hoping that Aaron would

soon recover. But there was no improvement, either on the next day or on the day after.

Then Phillips called an official meeting. All assembled in the evening, and he said to them:

"Mr. West has offered me the schooner, and he wants us all to go. It is his wish to remain here himself. I've told him that is out of the question." He paused, then added with a threatening, hard voice, "Any one disagree?" There was no answer. "I'm not going to sit here and let Mr. West die while the wind is in season."

"What are you going to do?" inquired Sanders.

"Take him and the old lady and Miss Lewis away with us."

"Where to?"

"Sydney. It's the nearest spot. We might get across to Fiji sooner, but there ain't no decent doctors there. Sydney's the place. Any one disagree?"

They looked from one to the other, stunned with the rapid progress of things. No one said a word.

Phillips continued:

"Then it is my duty to inform Miss Lewis of my decision. And from to-day you're all on duty. Sanders, you take over the cleaning of the *Amadea*. She isn't leakin'. I've been lookin' at 'er only yesterday."

"What's going to become of the villagers?" asked Sanders.

"Them beggars can die on their own, can't they? I think Mr. West has already been stretchin' Christianity a bit too far with them."

Sanders went away, disturbed in his mind.

"You'd better speak to Miss Lewis first," he said. "Then decide."

Phillips himself looked perturbed.

"It's better, at any rate, to try to save Mr. West," he said, sharply. "If he dies on the high seas, well and good, it's a sailor's death and we've done our bit. What Mr. West wants is an operation, and Sydney's the nearest spot for that. If he's goin' to last three weeks he'll be all right."

"Well, you talk to Miss Lewis," repeated Sanders, almost provokingly.

"I'm going to tell her what I'm going to do, that's all. I'm not going to fuss. After all, the poor young lady don't know life."

Saying this, Phillips walked off to Mr. West's bungalow and strolled up and down in front of it several times before entering. Then he went straight in.

He found Somna kneeling beside Aaron's bed, her face buried in her hands. She was praying. When she saw Phillips she rose immediately and went outside with him.

"Now then," he said, "I'm having the schooner prepared to sail. We're all goin' away."

"That is the will of my husband."

"*All*," Phillips went on. "I don't think you quite understand. I mean you, your mother, Mr. West, and us all."

He looked at her, as if to say, "You've got to come."

Somna considered for a moment, then shook her head sadly but firmly.

"No," she said. "Thou go, and leave thou my husband and Mother Sabeth with me."

"That is impossible. Mr. West will die if I leave him here. He needs an operation, a good surgeon who can cut out his illness with a knife. That's how it is."

Somna looked at Phillips with secret anguish. He spoke in a matter-of-fact way, while illustrating the application of a knife. "If it isn't done soon Mr. West will die, that's all," he added.

"I speak to my husband," Somna replied, and Phillips went away.

"But you must let me know soon," he said from a distance.

She agreed. For hours she waited at Aaron's side to ask him what she should do. Aaron, however, was incapable either of speaking or thinking. He wandered, talking of her all the time, but she knew this meant nothing except delirium. Suddenly she began to feel that he was going to die, that perhaps he would not even live as long as Mother Sabeth. He was going to die. She was being punished by God. But she did not despair; and she prayed:

"Please, great Father, let him not die. Let Thy wrath come unto me who has sinned, but let him live." She cried

in her heart, "Steady Thou my spirit and give me strength to part from my husband. Spare Thou his life and let me die in his stead."

Then she became silent again. A knife seemed to pierce her heart. She bowed her head and accepted what she thought to be the justice of God. He was taking away from her the man to whom she had coupled herself. He was punishing her.

When evening came, she had made up her mind. She went to Phillips and said, with determination:

"Take thou my husband with thee."

"What about you and your mother?" he asked.

"We stay here, where God has put us."

"Is that your conception of a wife's duty? Well, I'm hanged! What do you think Mr. West will say when he finds he is away from you?"

"Wilt thou tell him that Somna prays for him day and night, that Somna will always think of him, that God has punished her and she will do His will and stay with Mother Sabeth. Do not look angry. Take my husband, so that he may live. God wills it so."

Phillips turned away from her and stamped his foot on the ground.

"Who on earth is goin' to understand that child?" he muttered under his breath. "She can't do a thing without God. Makes me wish there wasn't such a thing."

Was it love, or generosity, or what was it? He would have to think about it again.

"I will let you know in the morning," he said to her.

She walked away. Phillips thought she looked much taller and thinner than usual. Something about her confused him. He didn't know whether it was dignity, spirituality, piety or simplicity.

"That girl puts me in a damned hole," he said to himself aloud. "I don't know what to do, or where I am."

"I thought you didn't," observed Mr. Humphreys, who was sitting in a corner, and had minutely observed the interview.

"I'm not goin' to let the master die here, I know that," burst out Phillips ferociously. "And if this young woman

refuses to come with us, well, we'll take him as he is. We'll leave the boy behind with her. Damned funny way of makin' love, refusin' to go with a man."

"I always thought them God-like kids stale," retorted Humphreys, sucking his pipe.

"The point is to save the master's life, and I'm goin' to do it. That's settled. Mr. West will thank me in the end."

"Give it to ye in the neck," said Humphreys, spitting out.

"Don't matter. It'll stop his island business for ever. He will forget this 'ere unfortunate infatuation."

"He'll die on the journey."

"And what of it? He's a sailor, ain't he?"

"Master Phillips," said Humphreys emphatically, "if you don't mind me sayin' so, you're a fool to disrupt what God has joined to pieces."

"Garn! You fellows always funk if there's anything to be done. That's why I'm your capt'n. Ye all need somebody with courage, the whole lot of you."

"This island is enough to make anybody funk," Humphreys summed up meditatively. "Them islanders die of disease. Us turns mad and sick. And that God-like kid all over the place! It's all muck. Upside down. I for one will be glad to be off. But if you're going to take yer babe with ye, ye'd better hide her from my view. I can't listen to her shrieks. As to that young idiot boy that's been hangin' around the place like an empty barrel—forgive me mentionin' it again, but you're a fool, Master Phillips, to take the boss away. That's the lot. Now then."

Phillips made a grotesque gesture and rattled his gun. But Humphreys ignored this and sucked away at his pipe placidly. He had had it out with the master, and to him that was all that mattered.

Phillips stuck to his decision. An honourable friendship of long years' standing was more important to him than what he thought was a temporary infatuation. He himself had experienced a good many varieties of that kind of thing. In addition, he thought this a first-rate opportunity to give the island the slip for ever. He was mighty sick of it. He was also spared the acceptance of Mr. West's alternative offer: to

have the schooner signed over to him and clear off, leaving Mr. West himself behind. To do that was not his nature. Neither was it his conception of business. Before putting his decision into practice, Phillips got up a lot of Dutch courage by means of a systematic application of gin and brandy.

As it happened, Aaron had temporarily regained his senses and the fever had abated when the crew stood at his bungalow with the canvas stretcher ready to take him away. But he was utterly weak and worn out, and his voice was almost inaudible. He looked round with what appeared to be extreme apathy, as if he had just returned from a world where there is no suffering. Naturally he looked for Somna, who stood by his bed with a face as cold as marble, her lips set hard and tight as he had never seen them before. He tried in vain to lift his arms towards her. Why did she not give him water? What were all those burly faces doing around him, looking at him as if he were some wonder? Why did their voices sound like fog-horns? Why did she not tell them to go away? Now she has turned away from him and that man—what's his name?—Phillips—comes with a glass of brandy and water. "What does he want to lift up my head for? Water!—that's good. I wanted that all the time. How kind of him to think of it. How the brandy burns! Heavens!"

Aaron uttered an involuntary cry.

"They're lifting me up, bed and all! Whatever is going to happen to me? And she comes to look at me again. . . . Somna! She looks harder than ever . . . Somna!"

He thought he was shouting her name, but in reality it was only a faint whisper.

"Somna, don't look so hard and terrible. What have I done? Oh, they're carrying me out! Where are they going to? Oh, come along, quick, quick, quick! They're taking me away from you! Oh, God! Don't let it happen!"

Phillips said, "Now, careful, boys! Mr. West's rambling a bit, but don't let it affect your nerves. Take me for your example. Ugh!" He rubbed a fist over his eyes. "When I say 'halt,' ye all stop and I give Mr. West the brandy and water."

Aaron rolled his eyes from left to right. The blue sky

was above him. It was evidently getting towards evening. What did that Phillips say?—he was rambling?

“We’re going down towards the woods. Why, they’re carrying me off bodily! Somna, stop them! Where are they going to?”

But there was no one to stop them. Aaron’s voice had become a mere whisper through fever. His carriers tramped slowly along towards the lagoon. They never spoke a word. They marched like coffin bearers in a funeral procession. Phillips was all over the place, now in front, now behind, showing the way here and there, his walk becoming more and more like the ocean waves, but his courage swelling in proportion.

When Aaron smelt the water of the lagoon he closed his eyes. When he was aboard, and the *Amadea* was steered out through the reefs a few hours later, Phillips administered to him quinine, four extra pills, and hot brandy and water, which sent him into a heavy sleep.

Straight as an arrow the *Amadea* headed for Sydney.

THE LAST JOURNEY

THE LAST JOURNEY

Chapter XXV

The *Amadea*, her sails swollen by the wind, was now barely visible. Somna stood on the sandy beach, gazing after her.

When the brown topsail, which looked like a little, dark bird in the heat haze on the skyline, finally vanished from view, her eyes looked horribly lifeless. Now she was alone.

She felt as if she were waking from a dream that had been both sweet and bitter. It had gone for ever, as Aaron had gone from her. In her heart woke the deadly certainty that she would never see him again. That was God's punishment for her sin.

She rested on the sands of the lagoon and tried to console herself. Had she not been alone before? Could she not endure her solitude? But for the moment all strength seemed to have left her. Her eyes ached from gazing across the sun-smothered waters, and a voice within her said:

"He will never return. It is God's will."

At last she rose up, resolved to live as she had lived before she had met Aaron and to trust in the guidance of God. The flicker of reality came back into her eyes, and she hurried homeward, as if afraid of her own shadow. As she passed through the silent woods, breathing audibly through her half-open mouth, she looked almost animal. Her face had a hard, defiant expression, and she looked down at her garments. Presently she stood still and with her outstretched palms she followed the lines of her hips and thighs, and finally began to unwind her silk wrapper. With a shy, almost stealthy side-glance, she removed her waist-cloth. Then she flung

her wrapper across her shoulders as she had done in the old days, arranged it like a loose cloak, and knotted the waist-cloth over it. Her hair she let float around her for a while, and wound it up in her old fashion just before she entered the bungalow. Aaron's boy was sitting on the steps and told her that Mother Sabeth was asleep. She gently stroked his smooth black hair, smiling at him as though she craved for his favour. Then she went to her own room to rest, and seated herself on Aaron's disordered bed. But she could not rest. She got up and walked about the room, flinging out her beautiful arms from time to time as if in despair. Then she sat down again on the bed, leaning back on her broad palms, and closed her eyes. Her pulse hammered against her warm neck. Her lips were drawn in and held fast by her teeth. She was trying to repress a stream of bitter tears.

In this attitude she prayed, and while she prayed she shook from head to foot with passion. She almost cried out the last words of her prayer:

"Not until I have fulfilled all and everything in the world, take Thou Thy Spirit from me! And if Thou willest me to suffer, I will bear it and atone."

After a while she rose up with an energy that seemed almost unnatural, and set about to clear up the room, which was all in disorder. She dragged her bed into Mother Sabeth's room, saying, "Now, as God's will has taken my husband from me, I will come back to thee."

But Mother Sabeth did not reply. She cared little for anything in the world. Her mind had become quite stupid. It seemed as if she had no longer any hold upon life.

In the evening Somna sat alone on the verandah and gazed out over the lake. She thought of Aaron intensely. She suffered with and for him.

* * * * *

The sultry trades which carried the representatives of civilisation into a far-off distance gently stroked the little island. The primeval silence of nature returned. Little had changed. White men with their sorrows and laughter had trampled over the island in a vain attempt to overcome nature, and

had left behind them a few houses, some things doomed to decay, and a heap of empty tins and bottles. Their pigs and fowls had been driven into the wilderness to find their own livelihood.

The multicoloured island birds chirped and darted through the shadows of the desolate forests as if they were pleased to be once more alone. Shoals of small fish rested immovably under the cascades of the stream. The obelisk on the mountain pointed skyward like a finger, as if to remind the Creator, "Here I am, exactly where You have put me."

Somna was sad, and very quiet in the midst of the forlorn peace of nature.

"Life is like this deep water. It is unreal. I feel unreal," she seemed to hear Aaron saying, just as if he were close beside her.

What a strange man he was!

Would she never again hear his voice, never hear him breathing again peacefully in the same room with her? Would she be always alone?

Somna found no sleep that night. She prayed, and from time to time in the lonely silence that almost strangled her, she listened to the uncanny rattling in Mother Sabeth's chest. She felt oppressed in the darkness, and went outside to gaze at the stars, to let the night air cool her skin.

But loneliness seemed to strike her more coldly from the firmament which now seemed to her vast and terrible. There was no sympathy in all its glory.

It enveloped everything, all the divine secrets that the soul strives after; and Somna lifted up her arms, not knowing that the millions of stars, the sun, the moon, the earth, move along their courses with stupid impotence. No consolation came to her. Her arms fell down again. The indefinable something, the ether of her nature, which once had made her in harmony with the infinite, Aaron had taken from her. Instead of the saint, the supernatural virgin, divine in purity and goodness, there was now only the woman, whom God had made for man, for the earth; not for Heaven and Himself.

"Light is none,
Save that which cometh from the pure serene
Of ne'er disturbed ether; for the rest
'Tis darkness all; or shadow of the flesh,
Or else its poison."

Once in Somna the spirit of eternity, the will of God had breathed in everything. Now all seemed earthly, perishable, and the island so small in the cold, merciless vastness which surrounded it that she could have fled from it. Could she elsewhere ever find again what her soul had lost? Where could she go? The ocean walled her in. She was a captive; and like all things around her, perishable. Aaron was right: all things in the world must perish.

* * * * *

By degrees the feeling of perdition began to haunt Somna like an invisible phantom. Fainter and fainter became the light from heaven which throws over all things a hue of eternity. Somna's eyes had once, clearly and simply as those of a child, perceived the wonders coming from God. But now, like an enemy, reality poured into her soul with all its poison.

To the trees, the stones, the savages, she was still Tatahita, the virgin of sunrise. But to herself, she was no longer the same Somna, she was a different creature, looking upon the world with new eyes. She was frightened by the change. She no longer asked God to be with her, to help her in her humble work; but prayed to Him to forgive her sins, her weakness and growing apathy. When she walked over the lonely mountain pass to Tunga she was no longer enthusiastic, but often stood still, surveyed the ring of ocean all around her, and prayed that a sail might appear on the horizon. Her soul began to long for an earthly solution of her miserable existence, and no longer found peace in resting at the feet of God. She seemed to herself to be going further and further away from God.

But she could not help herself. She seemed to be driven away irresistibly from her former self. Her loneliness began to terrify her. The stars, the moon, the shrouded trees and the mysterious silence roused in her uneasiness. She thought of mad Ben, and looked upon the surrounding woods with

suspicion. The very lake on whose borders she lived mystified her with its unknown depth, its lifeless waters.

"Life is like this deep water," sounded in her ears. But he who had spoken the words was not there to comfort her. If God had only let him remain with her!

Before she had known this man of her father's blood she had been given up to nature and to the savages with undivided love. The will to overcome evil, to sacrifice herself was perhaps a legacy from her father. Her beauty, her instincts, were a caprice of nature no doubt. She had been a mixture of exotic, savage and cultivated feelings and needs that had blossomed in natural, divine purity.

Aaron had changed her whole soul. And now she was like a rose tree which had no longer a shaft to support it. She drooped to the earth; her petals would be scattered by the winds.

* * * * *

One night Somna stole to her mother's bedside and uttered a faint cry. Mother Sabeth was dead. Her eyes and mouth were firmly closed. Her face looked hard and cold and seemed to stay, "I have done—finished."

Her thin, bony legs were stretched out stiff. Somna looked upon her with wonder, and touched her; but there was no more life. After a moment, she placed the little flickering lamp near her mother's head, and seated herself at the bottom of the bed to hold the last vigil with her oldest companion.

In the morning she discovered that Aaron's boy had run away. A sickly smile parted her lips, as if she had just found out that life was a hopeless thing. During the day, she dug a grave not far off, and when evening came, she dragged Mother Sabeth over to it on a mat and let her slide down into the hole. When she heard the body drop with an unearthly thud, she gasped for air as if choking, and bit her fingers.

"Was that Mother Sabeth," she thought, "who fondled me when I was a babe? It is lifeless. . . . I bury it as I have buried others before. And I shall be like that—when? . . . when? . . ."

Somna knelt down, and whispered in confusion, "Great Father in Heaven, Thy mercy is eternal. Take Thou the soul of my mother, and let her find happiness with my father in Heaven." There she stopped; she could not go on. She wanted to ask God for something for herself, but she dared not. He was sending her sorrow as a punishment. She had to accept it without a murmur. She was willing to atone. No tears came to her eyes. Her throat was dry. She suddenly craved for water. Hastily she threw palm leaves into the grave and shovelled in the earth. Then she went home quickly and drank a long draught of water. At night she shut herself into her room. Now she was quite alone. Mother Sabeth had gone at last. *Her* soul was free. God had shown her mercy.

* * * * *

As the days went by, Somna showed an increasing apathy about Tunga. Her visits became fewer. She began to prefer solitude to the long journeys across the mountain. Her reason told her that all her efforts were no longer bearing fruit. There was only one place where she found herself moderately comfortable, and that was in her and Aaron's joint room. It opened out on to the verandah, where she would seat herself in a cane chair, stay there for hours, and at times gaze back into the room where she had spread out on Aaron's bed all the rubbishy little possessions which he had left behind.

To these worthless things her heart clung as if they had been charms. Some of them were books, which she tried to read; but she soon gave it up. Their contents were too strange for her to grasp them. Sometimes she walked up the mountain pass as far as the sulphuric air would allow her, to spy out for ships. But there was neither sail nor smoke, nothing save the eternal, monotonous rollers as far as human eye could reach. On one occasion she longed for wings like those of a bird to grow to her body, not with any wish to fly to far-off lands, but to go up into the blue towards heaven, towards the remoteness where souls find happiness for ever.

The loneliness that gnawed at her heart began to stare from her eyes. A veil seemed drawn over them that gave her the

beauty of a sufferer, and two tender lines appeared between her brows through constant staring in one direction.

One day she was out in the woods. She leaned against a palm tree and listened to the birds, to the dry crackle of scorched leaves. It seemed as if she belonged to the shadows of the exotic forest, as if without her these woods would cease to be remote and silent. Her livid melancholy imparted itself to all things surrounding her. It was as if her presence checked nature from breaking out into riot.

The beautiful girl was an outcast from happiness, condemned by God to lifelong misery. It was painfully written upon her pale, calm face. There was profound devotion in that calmness, showing a will that was ready to suffer to the limits of human endurance.

* * * * *

One day Somna felt faint. A shiver went through her body, and for a moment a strange flash of light came into her tired eyes. They seemed to grow darker and deeper. She paused as if listening to something strange that nature communicates only to a woman.

She stood quite still and counted the days upon her fingers. A smile that would have glorified an angel went over her haggard face, and no Madonna portrayed by man ever looked up into the heavenly blue as Somna did then. Her sense of loneliness vanished in an instant, and before her hope rose like a comet, wonderful hope. She was a woman, a wife! Was it true? Was she then to be a mother? Was God now paying her a compensation? Was He taking pity, was He turning punishment into bliss?

When she reached home, she locked herself into her room, knelt down by Aaron's bed where all the precious little things were spread out, and began a joyful lament:

"Dearest, thou art not here. God has taken thee from me. But He has sent me His holy angel of Hope, and He has not forgotten His humble servant, Somna. Dearest, I believe I carry thy life within me. Oh, tell me how to thank God for such bliss. I shall no longer be alone. I shall have a tiny babe. Oh, God! Why dost Thou thus punish me and take

away the man I love and not let me tell him? Thy will is hard and strikes me cruelly. But I will abide by it. I will. Oh, great Father, I thank Thee. With these tears I offer Thee thanks. With these tears——”

She buried her face and cried silently in her miserable happiness.

Her mind leaped forward in the sweetest of good woman's dreams. Blackness vanished. Light appeared everywhere.

That night she crept into Aaron's bed with happy shivers. She called for him, groaned for him, as a wife groans for her dead husband. But to hope for his return was too much. She must be satisfied with the little ray of hope God had given her. He had punished her, but now He had consoled her. She went to sleep and her dreams were happy.

* * * * *

New hope brought new life to Somna. She went to Tunga on the following day. Her secret joy carried her along, and she began to have hope also for the savages. Nothing seems fruitless if there is hope. She resolved to take up her old life again, and longed to go into the chapel to begin anew the work of Christianity. The little bit of bliss that God had sent to her was quite enough to throw brightness also upon Tunga. Somna's heart was suddenly opened again; commiseration and sorrow for the savages crept in and almost overwhelmed her. She thought they were ever so much worse off than she was, and her protracted absence from them stung her conscience and added strength and speed to her journey. She no longer felt lonely; it was as if she again belonged to the island and the island to her.

Tunga lay before her. She stood still and suddenly uttered a cry. Her chapel was destroyed! The village itself seemed dead. They had ruined her work. All her joyful dreams fell to pieces, her heart became heavy, she almost sobbed. She had come to give these savages a share of her secret hope, and this was what they had done. There was no hope for them. Her little bliss belonged to her alone—could not be divided up.

At one time she had looked upon them as brothers and sisters, she had loved them. Now they were no longer brothers and sisters, but incorrigible idolaters, pagans who had nothing in common with her. She knew it, was inwardly certain of it; yet she wondered how she could think so. How greatly she must have changed. It seemed almost unnatural. Had her emancipation then destroyed her heart as well as her soul? Or had she perhaps given away so much to Aaron that there was none left for her old friends?

Her work was ruined. They had all returned to Oro. Tenania was ruling once more. She knew all that without being told. She saw the failure of her life. "A sinking ship." That was what Aaron had called Tunga. And he had also said, "it is no use clinging on to it." To what then should she cling? To Aaron? He was far away from her, gone for ever. To herself? She was but a sinful, weak woman? To the little ray of hope within her? Of what benefit was that to others now? She stood thinking deeply, and then she seemed to hear a voice whisper in her ear, "For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever." After a while she went on, with melancholy in her eyes, and walked the road she had walked hundreds of times before. She arrived before Marva-rao's house, and entered.

The great savage was stretched out fast asleep in a corner, and near him slept Tenania, whose wild smell filled the hut from the ridge-pole to the insalubrious floor.

In the dusk of the hut they looked like dangerous animals fallen asleep in the brooding heat of noon, to awake in the evening in order to set out in search of human prey.

"Brother and sister I have called them," said Somna, unable to keep from shuddering.

The air within the hut almost stifled her; she was attacked by sickness. Nevertheless, had she not been with Tenania and Marva-rao hundreds of times before and had she ever before entirely despaired of their souls?

Now in her heart she gave them up. Now she knew that they had nothing in common with her, that Christ was beaten, that she herself was defeated in all her work. Those two

dreadful, sleeping monsters were surely not meant to be led to God.

Yet something within her cried out against her despair, something that seemed to be the last manifestation of the divine power.

"Weak, sinful woman," it said, "you despair of sin because you have sinned yourself. If you have nothing in common with them, remember the words of Jesus. Do you think that you have fulfilled your task?"

Tenania awoke, growling a curse almost before she opened her narrow eye-slits. Then she turned her bulk and blinked at Somna, and a wild squeak greeted Aaron's wife.

"Marva-rao, awake!" she shrieked, hitting out for the chief as hard as she could. "The bastard has come to be thy wife. Tenania will be sharing in thy feast."

The tattooed chief sat up, and when he saw Somna a submissive look came into his eyes. But it changed almost immediately to impotent disgust, perhaps at himself.

"Tata-hita!" he growled hoarsely, and then a stupid smile stirred his bulky lips.

Tenania got up on to her knees. She was so fat and large, so deformed and inhuman, that her nakedness seemed natural. She showered a string of curses on Somna.

Somna turned away, and when Tenania paused for a moment to recover breath, said:

"Tata-hita speak to Hezekiah Marva-rao."

Tenania gave her husband a terrific blow with her fist, that seemed to shake the chief for a moment.

"Run thou and catch the pale bastard!" she shrieked. "Let there be a feast of marriage."

Marva-rao, however, rose up quietly, and as if by an impulse towards decency wrapped his tattooed body in a cloak.

"I speak to thee," he said to Somna.

Somna came a step nearer, ignoring Tenania. She drew herself up to her full height. Her hands were clenched tightly. Her heart and soul were aflame. Her voice was metallic when she spoke.

"I will come to thee no more, Hezekiah. Thou hast destroyed the work of Jehovah, thou art condemned by God.

Thou knowest the words of holy Jesus Christ and thou hast cast Him away. From this day Tata-hita will no longer come and seek thee to speak to thee. Thou knowest good from evil. Do thou now what thy heart wishes to do. Thou hast promised to believe in the only true God, and twice hast thou fallen back into evil and cast away Jehovah. Thou art full of falsehood and wickedness. Tata-hita can no longer be thy friend. I commend thee to the mercy of Jehovah."

Thereupon she turned and left the hut hurriedly, running towards the mountain as if pursued by an evil spirit. She went on and on and never stopped until she arrived exhausted at the bungalow. There she locked herself into Aaron's room, sank down before his bed, buried her face in her hands and prayed. There was left but the invisible God to listen to her heart-breaking beseechings, and she threw herself at His feet, praying for mercy for herself, for Marva-rao, for Tunga. She thanked Him so intensely for the little ray of hope and happiness that He had left her that her gratitude seemed almost out of proportion to the real value of the gift.

From that day Somna began to think of herself. In her solitude she wandered around the lake, to the lagoon, even as far as the little pool where at one time she used to bathe and where she had first met Aaron. Again she bathed there, but there was no Aaron to see her. She wandered home afterwards, but there was no longer Mother Sabeth. There was nobody—but herself.

She devoted many hours of the day to the sole thought of Aaron. The separation from him that had at first seemed almost entirely mental began to make itself felt physically. She began to feel active pain when she thought of him. The more intently her mind dwelt upon her circumstances, the louder her heart cried out for him. Her inward certainty of never seeing him again added to her pain a singular feeling of bitterness. She who had scorned him at one time, calling him sinful, now found herself defending him. She began to understand him, and in her heart grew up a vast love, an intense longing for him. Then she scolded herself for giving away to folly. Ought she to wish and long for him? Had she become so earthly as to wish contrary to the will of God?

Was there any joy in thus lacerating her heart? Her love was born too late. Perhaps that was another of God's resourceful punishments. She began to try to banish the thought of Aaron from her mind. She made a start by choosing another room in which to sleep, and stowed away all his rubbishy little things so that they should not again remind her of him. She forced herself to accept her new life as it was.

"So will I live on—a humble woman, to the last day of my life, and trust in the guidance of the great Father in Heaven," was her mute, faithful resolve.

* * * * *

One night, after reading some passages in the Bible, Somna was attacked by a shiver. Nature seemed wishing to communicate with her, seemed to have some strange message for her. She went to bed, wondering. Suddenly she felt a sharp pain go through her body.

But it passed away, and she fell asleep.

Late in the night she awoke, hot, flustered, bewildered. Her heart beat wildly, and she winced as if she were mortally wounded. She got out of bed, tottered to the little oil lamp and lighted it. Then she looked, gasped and dropped the little light. It went out, and with it all her dreams, all her hopes of motherhood. She sank down by her bedside.

A cramp seized her; she winced, her teeth chattered, she pulled at her hair, beat her head. "Oh, God," she groaned, "where art Thou? What hast Thou done? Dost Thou know it?"

There was no answer. Her own words sounded to her like blasphemy, and drove her to a state of horror. She was no longer Somna, but a wounded, tortured woman. She was condemned. Her loss was irreparable.

* * * * *

Five months had gone by. Nature had started on her process of destruction and reconstruction. A wild jungle had begun to grow everywhere around the bungalow. Half wild, scraggy chickens and fowls sought their livelihood in it, and

at times a string of small black pigs came to the borders of the lake to drink.

On the verandah still sat Somna. She was thin and worn. She looked neither a savage nor a civilised creature. Her wide-open dark eyes hardly moved, and stared lifelessly into one direction for long spaces of time. They mirrored a soul that had become detached from the world, that longed to go its own way into the unknown, into a new happiness waiting for it at the feet of God, into the paradise of Eternity.

Her heart was devoured in solitude by a love that she could not kill, a longing that would never be fulfilled. But she still lived, still bore her burden of sorrows, still prayed to God.

She had only to wait for the end.

One day whilst her eyes stared out over the ocean, a strange tremble came over her. It seemed as if she perceived something bodily, and yet could not realise it in her mind. A flush overspread her cheeks. She gave a gaunt kind of smile. There was a sail on the horizon. During the whole day she watched that sail; during the whole day a feverish hope filled her heart and soul. If she had been strong enough to walk up to the mountain, she would have done so, and made a fire, as her father had often done, in order to attract the vessel. But it was too far to walk, and perhaps the sail was only a hallucination. She could not tell.

The sun went down. Morning came again. The sail had gone.

Somna smiled blankly. She had dreamt, as she had dreamt many a time. It had been only a dream. There had really been no sail; not for her. There was no one coming to her island. And the sun went down again. A glorious new morning arose. She came out once more on the verandah. She had become as regular as the inevitable change from light to darkness. Her mind travelled the same road every day, and every night she was glad that another day had passed; that she was nearer to her end by one more day.

Then the sun went down again. But now he looked changed to her; and the mountain, the woods, the ocean, the sky, all seemed strange, no longer like old friends. The

crescent stood in the sky at a queer angle and peered down inquisitively into Aaron's desolate room. Somna rose up slowly from her chair on the verandah and went into the room. Driven by a strange impulse, she pulled out all his little belongings which she had hidden away months ago. She took up an old pipe of his and sucked at it; then a little nickel chain with some keys on it and played with them; then a cap of his, some collars, a blue tie and a vest. She spread them all out before her and gazed at them vaguely as if they, too, were strange to her. Then suddenly she kneeled down by his bed for a long while.

Presently she went out and gazed up at the sky. Had not that great God who had made the whole world, who directed the Universe, the power to make the soul of Aaron return to her?

She left the bungalow and strolled around the lake in the moonshine. Once more everything seemed different to her from what it had been. The myriads of stars glittered, but not for her. They were strangers to her. The trees, which she knew so well, looked like spectres, unreal and sinister; and the mountain towered up before her as if it threatened her with its terrible weight.

She came to the spot where she had once sat upright in her full virgin strength with Aaron. She remembered the sensations which had passed through her heart on that occasion. Now she seated herself with a sigh. Even that sigh frightened her. She said, "Aaron!" Her own voice sounded strange to her. It repelled her, as did the sky, the earth, and her own memories.

She whispered to God, "Dost Thou live, great Father in Heaven?" She asked as if she doubted. Then she went on:

"Forgive Thy humble woman. She can bear no longer the cross of Thy punishment. Take Thou Somna to Thee."

Whilst she prayed, her eyes were fixed on the black waters of the lake. They were no strangers to her that night.

"Life is like this deep water," she heard Aaron saying. "It has no ground—it seems unreal."

She had thought of that saying many times, but she had never thought that in that deep lake was hidden the way to a

new life for her. She put one foot into the water. She smiled. It seemed to refresh her. Then she put in the other foot. For a moment, her face changed. It became like that of a young girl who has never known sorrow. She suddenly felt as if she were drawing near to Aaron. She waded away from the shore a yard or two. It was so heavenly, so cool and strange. All her sorrows and sufferings seemed to disappear. She seemed re-born to a new existence. Then she suddenly lost the ground beneath her feet, gave a faint cry—disappeared. The waters rippled all around. The moon in the lake looked alive and bizarre.

For a moment, a pale face appeared on the surface of the lake.

A fiery star shot through the dark blue night. Was it a soul—on wings?

* * * * *

A week afterwards Aaron's crew, except Dale, who had died suddenly in Australia, stood near the bungalows on the islands in a semicircle. Aaron was inside his bungalow and they waited for him to come out with Miss Lewis.

"He seems to take a long time over it," said Sanders, with a side-glance towards Master Phillips which showed that he was talking to the captain. "I don't believe she is there at all."

"Where do you think she is then?" asked Phillips nervously.

Sanders made a vague gesture.

"I have an ill omen in me," he said. "I told you when Mr. West got ill that it was *her* place to decide what should happen to him."

"And you carted him away, capt'n," Humphreys chipped in, "'cause you'd had enough of these 'ere islands. And now back we all come again. I told yer at the time, an' now it's too late, 'cause I shouldn't wonder——"

"Shut your row," replied Phillips, savagely. "None of you knows anything about life. He's been operated, hasn't he? Well, and what do you think would have happened if he hadn't been operated? Eh? We should all have a new mas-

ter now. And I says, after years of honourable friendship, and swears by God as I've done the right thing. Now then!"

"Well, well," remarked Humphreys, shaking his head queerly, "I knows life well enough. It is such honourable friendships as we indulge in as makes life all wrong. I could be me own master by now if it hadn't been for you, Phillips. I hate you—there! Nothing would have got me back here if the master 'adn't 'ad such a funny look abaht 'im that seems to knock the bottom out of one. I tell yer, the extra fifty quid would never 'ave got me 'ere. But there's something abaht Mr. West I likes."

"Something mysterious," said Sanders. "D'you remember what sort of a face he made when he was told of the *Baby Lily's* wreck, and poor old Ben being drowned with all them cross-bred dogs?"

"Aye," they all replied.

"He just got as white as a sheet, and said, 'Another fiasco.' That's how he took it. I wonder what he will say if anything's happened to Miss Lewis?"

Humphreys laughed. "Them God-like kids go up with the clouds. P'raps she's steamed off like that." He looked at Phillips, as much to say, "There, old fellow! It'll be your fault if she has. You took Mr. West away."

"He'll find her all right," said Phillips hoarsely. "What could have happened to her? Has she not been here for years without us? Mr. West, of course, is over-anxious. I don't understand that sort of infatuation. I'll be glad to get away with him and her for good. He's sorely trying our honourable friendship."

"Well, well," said Humphreys, "in a way he owes his life to you."

At that moment a wild chicken darted out of the bungalow and flew into the adjoining jungle. It made a noise which struck the crew as intensely European. Then Aaron came out. He was thin, pale, and looked awful.

"Come here!" he shouted to the crew. "Come in here!"

His voice sounded like thunder. They rushed towards him, but slowed up on the steps as if they were about to enter a mortuary.

"Come in," roared Aaron, "and look for yourselves. Nobody here! Now then, Phillips, no more of your optimistic talk: 'Don't be anxious, Mr. West, it will be all right.'"

He looked at Phillips wildly and said, with tremendous pain in his voice:

"It isn't all right. It's all bloody well wrong. Do you hear?"

"Yes," said Master Phillips hoarsely.

"There is no one here!" cried Aaron in despair. "No one! Go and look for yourself. And look at that bed there—all my things spread out as if they were going to be buried. The old woman gone, my wife gone! There's the open Bible! Don't look at me, damn you, sir, look at the things. O Lord! five months of it! How the devil can you expect any one to live five months alone here?"

The crew, stirred by Aaron's piercing words, stared all over the rooms, as if they had been the trustees of the place.

"She must be somewhere else," said Phillips.

"Perhaps over the mountain," suggested Sanders. "Perhaps she's gone back to live there until you came back, Mr. West."

"Perhaps not," remarked Humphreys curtly.

Aaron stood in the middle of the room, thinking. His self-possession had utterly left him, and growing grief was written on his ravaged face. He trembled like a man with wrecked nerves.

"Tunga, Tunga!" he said, almost inaudibly. Then raising his voice, he added, "If she has gone to Tunga, if I find her there, if anything has happened to her, I will kill the whole breed of savages one by one. That fellow Marva-rao last! Come on!" he shouted. "Come on!" and he started off, leading his men, who followed without a murmur.

* * * * *

The village lay at their feet. They stood still. Aaron pointed to the destroyed chapel, and said, "See?" Then he went on. Before entering the village, he said:

"Each one go his own way and look round. All meet here again."

The men separated on their search for Somna.

Aaron stumbled along, saying under his breath all the time, "Oh, my God! my God!"

At the end of the village a thick cloud of savage water-birds rose from a human corpse on the approach of the men. From Marva-rao's hut came an uproar of wild shouts. Aaron went straight to it and entered.

In a corner Tenania was spread out devouring a large uncooked bread-fruit. She seemed to be talking to herself and giggled. When she saw Aaron she burst out into a flood of squeaks and growls and smacks, mingled with swear words and vile curses. But she could scarcely be heard, for Marva-rao was in violent convulsions. He was sitting in the middle of the room holding his head between his hands. His eyes protruded from their sockets, and he seemed to be suffering from awful assaults of agony, probably in his brain. His mouth was wide open, and his inhuman shouts and shrieks rent the air.

For a moment Aaron stood petrified; then he fled from the hut in horror. He so forgot himself that he began to shout aloud for Somna.

"Somna! Somna! Where are you?"

He stood still again and again, shouting for her; then he stumbled on and on, muttering, with an almost childlike, whimsical whine, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

But Somna was not found in Tunga.

Night came.

The men went back to the bungalows. They slept in the open. Aaron forbade them to come near him. He went into his bedroom, sat down on his bed and cried, then walked about the room, whispering hoarsely again and again:

"Somna! Somna! Somna!"

In the morning he met his men once more. He fired off dozens of revolver shots, and their echoes, rolling over the mountain, came back from the woods and the sky.

"If she hears that, she will know I have come back," he said. "Let us search the island."

They did so, as well as they could, but Somna was not found.

After three days, Phillips discovered a grave. He told Aaron of it.

"In the name of God let us open it and look," Aaron said, so terribly that every man of the crew shivered. Aaron uncovered the grave himself. The sweat poured from his skin and fell into it. The men stood off in awe at a distance. The air became terrible. But Aaron went on and on. Finally he drew out some palm-leaves, then gave a wild shout and darted out of the hollow. He shovelled back the earth with superhuman energy. Then he fell down exhausted. His men carried him away.

Three weeks passed. Aaron lived on in the bungalow. The island had been searched in every corner. But he had not found Somna. He lay for hours staring into the deep lake. His eyes were full of horror and suspicion. But there was no bottom to the lake that he could get at. He could not search those deadly waters.

Phillips went to talk to his master. Aaron listened to him coldly. Phillips cried his eyes out, but that did not move Aaron.

"Stupid man," he said to him, "it isn't your fault. It's that one's!" and he pointed towards Heaven. Then he got hot and flustered and went about like a voracious animal in a cage, hammering his massive head with his fists, and crying out:

"Oh, Phillips, if I only knew!"

Then he wept aloud, not a bit ashamed in the presence of his crew.

The men dulled their nerves by drinking excessively at every opportunity, but nevertheless they saw that Mr. West was slowly going crazy. They held a conference, therefore, and decided to tell him that they were going to leave the island.

But on the morning after the conference, Aaron came to his crew of his own accord. He seemed very calm, and spoke quite naturally. He thanked them for all they had done for him, and asked them to take him to the *Amadea*.

So they took their master in their midst and marched off in deadly silence.

They arrived at the whaler. There Aaron stood still on

the girdle of sand and looked towards Heaven as if he would pierce its remotest recesses.

His veins stood out like whipcord, his fists were clenched; he bit his lips so that the blood ran into his beard. His men shrank back from him. At last he said, in an icy voice:

"God in Heaven! You have tricked me. Do you hear? I've given up my life to You, and You've played me false. For the rest of this mortal life, once and for all,—I do not recognise You any longer. You can do with me what You like, but I don't care a damn. Between You and me . . . finished!"

Then with unnatural calm he told his men to step into the whaler and take him away.

Chapter XXVI

A cold wind blew into the cabin of the *Shark*.

Captain Aaron West rubbed tears from his eyes with his bare, cold hands. All that had happened more than twenty years ago. But the remembrance of Somna still pained him.

When he had returned to London after her death, he had gone to his shop in Covent Garden to see Uhland Wright. There he had hoped to find some of his money, of which he was then sorely in need.

But when he entered the little street off the Strand he saw at once that his thermometer shop had disappeared. A sweet shop was there in its place. He could see from a distance: "Cadbury's Chocolates," "Rowntree's Gums." The landlord told him that Mr. Wright and Betty, now calling herself Mrs. Wright, had shut up the shop and gone away—"oh, months ago!"

Then he became possessed with rage against human beings, and resolved to trick them and also to get money from them. He started his island syndicate and issued the prospectus, which he held now in his hands. No. 3, Bow Lane, had been a bucket-shop, and the police had cleared Aaron out of it. It was due entirely to the timely intercession of Aaron's solicitor that the law did not rake him into prison for swindling.

After that last episode in his life, Aaron had become an outcast.

Then one night in the depth of the winter, with a hundred and odd sovereigns in his pocket, of which he had never spoken a word to any one, Aaron went about the West End of London. For a while he contemplated doing away with himself. The world meant nothing to him. He was going to have one more grand, final taste of life, and then—out of it for ever. A dinner, wine and woman's company were all he craved for.

So he stood in the cold under a lamp-post in Leicester Square. He looked quite a different Aaron again. His thick, short beard was shaven off. His eyes looked coated with despair, but hungry.

From his pitch he eyed the Londoners and world-citizens who passed by and looked out for a woman with whom to share his last night in the world.

The woman came in the end. Aaron fancied her from a distance. She drew near to him, beginning to smile at him, then suddenly turned away.

Aaron had begun to smile at her, too, but the smile suddenly froze on his lips. A look of stupefied horror came into his face, and he stood as if petrified. "Victoria!" he gasped. He made a move to go after her, but she was lost in the darkness. He could not find her.

That was the last he ever saw of Victoria.

Late in the night he landed in a drinking-house in the docks. There he met a man whom he knew. He drank with him heavily, and in the morning they went together to Lowestoft.

A few days later, Aaron had bought the *Shark* and begun his lonely life on the seas.

Now the *Shark* was getting old and rickety. Aaron was still strong. He did not really care whether he lived or died. His brain and soul had become quite used to this sort of life. He hated land, loved the sea, and cared for nobody except, perhaps, David Sunbeam, and now David had to go home to his mother in Plymouth.

Presently a voice shouted:

"Halloa, Mr. West! Where are you? I've got the forage and your money."

David jumped on board and came into the cabin. He looked at his master with curious concern, then saw his half-crowns lying by Aaron on the old mattress.

"Sit down here, David," said Aaron. The boy sat next to him. "We can't sail into Plymouth with the *Shark*," he continued. "She's done, I think. I'm going to winter here. You must go home by train. Now, what is all this money doing in the silver cup?"

David blushed. "I was going to ask you—I mean—I've been reading that paper, and thought that as you are the proprietor of that island I would lend you the money I've saved to invest in that island of yours."

"Oh," grunted Aaron. "Let me tell you, David, you're a fool. Don't you go in for things you don't know about. You take that money and give it to your mother."

He tore up the prospectus and threw it overboard.

"Now we'll have some dinner, David. Tell me, what did Smith say to you when he rowed you over?"

"He asked me if you were dotty, sir."

"Oh! What did you say?"

"Nothing, sir. I never talk about you."

"H'm!"

* * * * *

A few days afterwards there was a moving little scene on board the *Shark*. David Sunbeam was leaving Captain West. It mattered to no one, except to the two of them. David's eyes hung upon Aaron's strange features with child-like sorrow. Aaron held the boy's hand for a long time; then he gave him the silver cup, and said:

"Promise me, David, to give your mother the letter and the money I have put into it. Now then—that's all. Good-bye, me lad."

David shed a few tears when he left in the dinghy of Messrs. Smith and Son, whilst Aaron walked into the cabin,

thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked after him through the port-hole.

Later he gazed over the cold sheet of water into the early evening.

"Here's where I'm going to winter!" he grunted.

It mattered little to him where it was. His heart was frozen up already. He was an odd sort of fellow and cared nothing for anybody now David was gone. He had told his Creator, over twenty years ago, to "do with him what He liked." But nothing seemed to have happened to him since.

"Oh, well," grunted Aaron, "I don't care a damn for the world."

THE END

